

Public Relations Case Studies: Strategies & Actions

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Contents

Introduction	1
Learning from Case Studies	2

Main Body

Case Study #1: Better.com Doesn't Live up to its Name	5
Case Study #2: A Good Time, Not a Long Time: The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge	15
Case Study #3: The Tylenol Crisis	22
Case Study #4: Surprise Strike Against UPS	30
Case Study #5: PETA Denuded	37
Case Study #6: Bud Light & Social Media Influencer Dylan Mulvaney	42
Case Study #7: Citizen Activism and Col. Muammar Gaddafi	52
Case Study #8: Home Depot's Leadership Crisis	56
Case Study #9: Entergy Responds to Hurricane Katrina	63
Case Study #10: Purdue Pharma and the Opioid Crisis	75
Case Study #11: Jack in the Box E. Coli Crisis	82
Case Study #12: NASA Challenger Disaster	88
Case Study #13: Nespresso Coffee Pods and Corporate Greenwashing	95
Case Study #14: Bernie Sanders' Media Blackout	100

Case Study #15: “Hello Hong Kong” Needs a Reintroduction	108
About the Author	119

Welcome to *Public Relations Case Studies: Strategies & Actions*. This OER textbook provides students with real-world PR case studies. The case studies explore PR dilemmas and campaigns in a variety of sectors and circumstances. The book offers learning opportunities about audience analysis, campaign planning, strategy, tactics, message development, media relations, and crisis communications for the PR practitioners of today and the future.

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Learning from Case Studies

by Sam Schechter

The study of public relations is one more defined by best practices than theory or models. While both exist, the experiences—both positive and negative—of PR practitioners working in the field, often in harrowing circumstances, offer invaluable learning opportunities for students.

Many of the case studies in this OER textbook link real-world events with models and/or theories that PR practitioners may have learned in school, perhaps even from another OER textbook: [*Public Relations: From Strategy to Action*](#). Such connections help to crystalize the thinking of a PR practitioner, giving structure and tangible examples to otherwise conceptual learning.

This is one of the pinnacle learning opportunities that comes with case studies. Generally, a case studies explores what happens in a microcosm to consider what learning from that case can be applied globally or, in the reverse, a case study may explore a global phenomenon and consider how learning about that phenomenon can be applied to a specific campaign, client, crisis, or circumstance.

As students read these case studies and consider the learning opportunities to which they are exposed, these are the questions they should be posing to themselves:

- What happened in this case study that could be effectively applied elsewhere?
- What happened elsewhere that could have been applied to the circumstances of this case?
- How does this case study validate PR models and

theories?

- How does this case study challenge PR models and theories?
- What successes from this case study can be replicated?
- What failures from this case study should be avoided?

Critically considering those questions will bring each case study to life and maximize the learning that each offers students.

Enjoy the case studies and take note that more will be added over the coming years.

Case Study #1: Better.com Doesn't Live up to its Name

By Kristin Ignacz, 2022

The Case

Vishal Garg is the founder and CEO of the digital mortgage company Better.com (Towey, 2021). The [Better.com](https://www.better.com) website encourages users to call and get pre-approved for a mortgage in as little as three minutes. Unfortunately, that is not the only task the Better.com CEO thinks should take three minutes. On November 25, 2021, Garg fired 900 staff members over a Zoom call of the same length (Butterfield, 2021).

Even though Better.com had just received \$750 million as part of a merger deal, Garg blamed the changing market and low productivity as reasons for layoffs (Feuer, 2021). He unsympathetically announced on the Zoom call that Better.com needed to reduce its staff so the company could survive and to fulfil its mission within a changing market (Feuer, 2021). The key message that his terminated staff heard was: You are fired because the finances of the company are more important than you are. Garg wished his employees luck before their workstations shut down and their immediate termination began (Azevedo, 2021).

Garg's layoffs also sent a clear message of expendability to a secondary audience: his remaining employees. To drive this message home, Garg initiated a townhall meeting with his

remaining employees the following day. The key message to his staff was to work harder or they too would be fired. He established a “Better 2.0 plan” with a “leaner, meaner, hungrier workforce” (Towey, 2021), where his staff would be heavily monitored and where failure was unacceptable.

Public Relations Failures

In both meetings with his employees, Garg made the critical mistake of ignoring his dependency on a critical resource: his employees. From a public relations perspective, he failed to see that his employees were potentially the most important public, even more than his customers and stockholders (Guth & March, 2007, p. 57).

Garg made countless public relations mistakes during both employee meetings:

- During the Zoom call Garg assumed an “unapologetic tone” (Feuer, 2021) and his body language was casual and disengaged to demonstrate a lack of concern and duty of care for his employees. The three-minute length of the call also demonstrated disrespect.
- During the townhall meeting, Garg’s threatening and devaluing messages to his remaining vulnerable employees demonstrated a complete lack of empathy and an unethical use of power.
- Garg failed to recognize that the values of his employees were different than his own; his employees’ top priority was not the financial position or mission of the company, as it was for Garg. He failed to know his audience.
- Garg’s egocentric one-way messages repeatedly used the words “I” and “the company” instead of making the meetings about “you”: his employees. He failed to prepare a better message or encode the message in a way that

would be well received.

- Garg was not transparent about the company's major recent infusion of capital; telling his employees they were being terminated so the company can survive when the company just received \$750 million was dishonest; the CFO of the company had received a \$850,000 annual raise and Garg himself had received a \$25 million bonus (Fluke, 2021).
- The timing of the terminations was poorly planned and occurred exactly one month before Christmas, a practice most audiences would perceive as heartless.
- Among those fired were the entire diversity, equity, and inclusion team (Butterfield, 2021), thereby sending the message that Better.com lacks corporate ethics or social responsibility.
- Garg also unlawfully offered the terminated employees only half of the legal amount of severance that they were owed (Fluke, 2021). This spurred a class action lawsuit that further highlighted the company's dishonesty and business ineptitude to Better.com's internal and external audiences.

Garg's actions resulted in countless disgruntled employees who held power over the company's reputation. Recordings of the Zoom call and townhall meetings were posted online. Traditional press outlets began to pick up the story. External audiences were shocked and outraged.

Response and Action

What was Better.com's response as the crisis broke?

They did nothing.

Experienced public relations professionals know the importance of acknowledging an issue immediately and

providing a truthful and carefully crafted response on multiple media outlets to protect the reputation of the company (Cardin & McMullen, 2014, p. 256). Instead, Better.com did nothing, failing to control the message and failing to engage in any reputation management.

The reason for this appears twofold. First, the director of public relations, the director of marketing, and the vice president of communications all quit directly after the terminations and townhall meeting. Each of these key advisors cited their reason for leaving as Garg's management style and inability to take advice (Feuer, 2021). In a well-run business, the public relations department should be involved in major decisions to advise management about how stakeholders and the public will react to certain practices (Cardin & McMullen, 2014, p. 253). At Better.com, Garg had dismissed the importance of this advice and had lost his advisory team and crisis management team as a result.

Second, because of Garg's lack of interpersonal skills and unethical personal values, he felt he had done no wrong. As such, he failed to acknowledge the public's expectation for a response and felt he had no reason to communicate with intervening audiences, internal audiences, or external audiences.

Garg should have acted by accepting fault and providing solutions publicly and transparently.

Instead, he secretly took to social media under an alias name (Towey, 2021). Most public relations professionals will assert that "If you participate in any online discussions, always identify which company you are representing. It is highly unethical and almost always counterproductive to pretend to be someone you are not.... Chances are someone will identify who you really are, causing you and your organization embarrassment" (Cardin & McMullen, 2014, p. 185).

This is precisely what happened to Garg. He took to Blind.com under the alias name "uneducated" where he

accused his terminated employees of only working two hours per day (Towey, 2021). His rude and aggressive comments told the public to “get educated” (Taylor & Gross, 2021). Once Garg was exposed as the author, his actions reinforced negative public opinion of his unethical and untrustworthy nature.

By completely failing to control the message and insulting key stakeholders in the process, the crisis escalated with intense media and public criticism. The reputation of Better.com and Garg spiralled beyond control.

On December 6, 2021, 11 days after the Zoom firing, a message was finally released on the Better.com website media section. Instead of presenting a press release and preparing a wellcrafted media resource section, Garg simply posted a copy of a letter that was addressed to his remaining staff. The letter continued to make the same mistakes that he made during his meetings and focused on the company instead of his employees. It was also too little, too late.

The meager apology to staff was received by the public and media as disingenuous. Garg then took a leave of absence from the company.

To date, the apology message to staff is the only item listed under Better.com’s media section regarding the crisis.

Outcomes

Better.com has become famous for its terrible treatment of staff and has secured one of the top spots on Bloomberg’s top PR blunders of 2021 (Alaimo, 2021). The company’s relationship with most publics has been heavily damaged, particularly the relationships with his target market and target investors.

According to Forbes Advisor, Better.com’s target market are Americans aged 20-34, a group of digitally savvy folk who also represent 37% of homebuyers in the market (Tepper, 2022). His tech savvy audience naturally took to social media to express

their disgust with Garg's actions. One example is opinion leader Joshua Fluke who has 495,000 YouTube followers and 13,000 Instagram followers. His series of YouTube videos examining Garg and Better.com have amassed near 600,000 views and 33,000 likes (Fluke, 2021). His key message in each video is that Better.com is dishonest, inauthentic, and should not be supported.

Better.com was planning to go public by merging with Aurora Acquisition Corp. for a combined company value of \$16.9 billion (Daniels & Hurst, 2022). The company planned to go public in December 2021; however, these plans were delayed (repeatedly) due to the damaged reputation of the brand. Trusted financial analysts continued to advise investors to, "consider waiting until the dust settles before planning to buy shares of Better.com" (Tepper, 2022). By undervaluing his relationship with key stakeholders, Garg's actions have directly and negatively impacted his relationship with his target market, his social capital, and his bottom line.

How many staff have resigned from Better.com since November 2021 remains unknown; however, one certainty is that Better.com will have difficulty finding and retaining quality staff in the future.

A Better Plan than Better.com

Several points have been made in this case study about Better.com's failures and what an experienced public relations official should have done instead. Overall, what can be learned from Better.com's failures?

Building respectful and loyal relationships matters.

Better.com had terrible relationships with its employees

through a toxic work environment and equally disturbing relations with its investors that resulted in several lawsuits (Fluke, 2021).

Building trusted and loyal relationships with the public and a variety of stakeholders is a crucial component of any business. Building relationships is also a critical part of a crisis prevention strategy (Cardin & McMullen, 2014, p. 254). Before quitting, the PR team may have tried to put pre-crisis strategies and issues management in place; however, they were insufficient to counteract the damage that Garg inflicted on the company daily. Two-way communication is the key to building relationships.

Ethics matter.

Unchecked power from an unethical CEO is a public relations crisis waiting to happen. Public relations professionals must implement a code of conduct and a code of ethics: two codes Better.com lacked. Internal managerial audits and training to create responsible managers who demonstrate moral and ethical principles is also important to create a positive organizational culture and mitigate issues.

The message matters.

When Garg addressed his staff, both in the Zoom meeting and in the townhall, genuine, compassionate, careful messaging may have prevented this crisis from escalating. A positive example would be of Airbnb who laid off 1,900 staff in 2020. The CEO's message confirmed absolute transparency and made their employees feel valued. Every decision was made with thoughtfulness and compassion (Kelly, 2021). Airbnb received positive publicity for their ethical practices and positive messaging.

Preparation matters.

In addition to a crisis prevention strategy, a well-crafted media resource section on the company website is important. Also, working with the media prior to a potentially damaging event can assist with reputation management. Better.com could have used embargo agreements with media to manage perception and control the message at the time of the terminations.

Execution of the public relations plan matters.

When crisis strikes, an immediate, ethical, and transparent response with solution-based answers is crucial to success. Know your audience; create a persuasive message; control the message. As seen in the case of Better.com, if you fail to control the message, someone else will.

Hopefully, we can all aim to do better than Better.com.

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Case Study #2: A Good Time, Not a Long Time: The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge

By Doyin Agbaje and Hannah Lind, 2022

Background

The ALS Association is a US-based non-profit organization whose focus is on funding the advancement of global research into Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, a debilitating and life-ending disease (ALS Association, n.d.). The organization's aim is to discover effective treatments and, ultimately, a cure. Alongside this, a large portion of their funding goes directly towards patient care and services (ALS Association, 2021). In 2014, the ALS Association experienced one of the most sensational non-profit fundraising successes in history: the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge.

Pat Quinn, Anthony Senerchia and Pete Frates—three men who were living with ALS—were credited as co-founders of the original campaign (Associated Press, 2020), which invited people to dump a bucket of ice water on themselves to briefly simulate the physical sensation of numbness and loss of body control that comes with ALS. Along with dumping the bucket of water on themselves, participants were urged to film this action, post the video online, and challenge others to participate—and to donate to the ALS Association.

Unwittingly, these three men launched a fundraising campaign that went viral across social media and ended up raising over \$100 million (ALS Association, 2019).

Goals

The Ice Bucket Challenge was originally intended to raise awareness and understanding of ALS and to encourage people to make donations to the Association (Sifferlin, 2014). The target audience was first-hand social connections to the original participants who had a personal interest in the cause and could then spread the message across their networks.

By the time the national headquarters of the ALS Association became looped into the growing trend through a local chapter representative, the social media reach was growing exponentially and the primary goal appeared to shift to simply maximizing financial donations.

Key Actors and Actions

Beyond Quinn, Senerchia, and Frates—whose presence was also later important to help discount criticisms that such a campaign made light of such a serious condition—many others became important figures in the campaign.

Carrie Munk—chief communications and marketing officer for the ALS Association—played a key role in managing the viral response and her background in crisis communications proved crucial in maintaining strong internal and external messaging throughout the campaign (Nichols, 2015). This involved counteracting misinformation and providing transparent financial information.

As the campaign's two-step model grew and built wider

engagement, key actors included notable participants, such as Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey, LeBron James, and George W. Bush (Steel, 2014). The first media attention for the campaign came from NBC News personality Matt Lauer being nominated (Trejos, 2017).

Engaging Hollywood proved a huge success. Many participants likely joined in after seeing their favourite celebrity taking the Ice Bucket Challenge. Although instigated by people who had ALS, the campaign became viral when celebrities were nominated. This was the reason for its worldwide circulation.

Transparency instilled confidence in participants and the media. The organization was transparent in the presentation of donations received and how it was used for research efforts (ALS Association, 2019). This had the effect of increasing credibility and a sense of trust.

Key Messages

The key message of the campaign was: “You should donate to this cause because you might help to find a cure for a serious disease and you’ll have fun while doing it.” The message was encoded by promoting an engaging activity that encouraged people to participate, nominate others, and donate. The message was disseminated through social media, predominantly Facebook, Youtube, and Instagram. As people experienced the Ice Bucket Challenge, the message proved true and their enthusiasm to spread the message was self-replicating.

Outcome

The challenge spread like wildfire; about 71 million people participated worldwide (Trejos, 2017). The ALS Association raised \$115 million USD (ALS Association, 2019). The money was committed to research and led to breakthroughs: a handful of genes associated with ALS were discovered (2019).

Although the organization successfully raised millions, the main original cause of the challenge was neglected. The challenge (and hashtags) shifted from the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge to the Ice Bucket Challenge. Many individuals who participated, including the authors of this case study, were unaware of what ALS was and what the donations were for. The challenge became a generic trend on social media and many celebrities failed to mention anything about donating in their posts (Wenn.com, 2014). Although the ALS Association experienced a spike in searches about the condition at the time, in comparison to the millions of participants worldwide, the ratio demonstrates a lack of engagement from most participants. Despite the worldwide participation in the challenge, many donations went to other charities (Townsend, 2014). The outcome was that the goal of creating awareness was hindered and seemingly a small percentage of people actually donated, albeit eventually aggregating into a huge sum (Steel, 2014).

Likewise, the challenge was short-lived. It only lasted a few weeks, as people quickly forgot the cause (Trejos, 2017). If the goal was to create long-term awareness about the disease, this was impeded. The ALS Association tried to make the challenge an annual tradition, but could not replicate the traction of the original campaign.

Despite these negatives, the campaign was incredibly successful in terms of popularity and financial gain. This case suggests that social media may provide a temporary boost in

visibility and funding, but those effects can be ephemeral and short-lived.

Learning for PR Practitioners

The ALS Association itself acknowledged that the success of the campaign was “lightning in a bottle” (Ruiz, 2017). However, there were features to its popularity that PR practitioners may be able to replicate:

- The national ALS Association responded positively to the grassroots activity from people who were their direct stakeholders. This fostered credence and credibility with the audience and neutralized claims that the campaign was frivolous. This also serves as a reminder that national umbrella organizations need diligent and regular media monitoring so that they are closely following the activities and campaigns of local chapters.
- The campaign made participation emotionally rewarding. Some of the audience’s motivation was completely different to those of the originators and the ALS Association—in this case, simply having fun with minimal knowledge of the cause—but capturing that enthusiasm nonetheless paid off for everyone.
- When launching a campaign, organizations should find a quiet point in the news cycle or look for a time when media audiences are in need of a “feel good” story (Ruiz, 2017).

Going viral can be a double-edged sword. If the goal is to achieve a temporary boost in funding or promoting an activity, virality could be worth pursuing. However, the potential benefits must be weighed against factors such as the investment of necessary time and energy to control the

message and deal with any unintended consequences. The ALS Association, for example, had to restructure their organization to manage a hugely scaled-up budget, while still providing transparent information to donors about how donations were spent (Nichols, 2015).

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Case Study #3: The Tylenol Crisis

Before the crisis, Tylenol was the most successful over-the-counter product in the United States with over one hundred million users. Tylenol was responsible for 19 percent of Johnson & Johnson's corporate profits during the first 3 quarters of 1982. Tylenol accounted for 13 percent of Johnson & Johnson's year-to-year sales growth and 33 percent of the company's year-to-year profit growth. Tylenol was the absolute leader in the painkiller field accounting for a 37 percent market share, outselling the next four leading painkillers combined, including Anacin, Bayer, Bufferin, and Excedrin. Had Tylenol been a corporate entity unto itself, profits would have placed it in the top half of the Fortune 500 (Berge, 1998).

During the fall of 1982, for reasons not known, a malevolent person or persons, presumably unknown, replaced Tylenol Extra-Strength capsules with cyanide-laced capsules, resealed the packages, and deposited them on the shelves of at least a half-dozen or so pharmacies, and food stores in the Chicago area. The poison capsules were purchased, and seven unsuspecting people died a horrible death. Johnson & Johnson, parent company of McNeil Consumer Products Company which makes Tylenol, suddenly, and with no warning, had to explain to the world why its trusted product was suddenly killing people (Berge, 1998).

Primary Evidence

Robert Andrews, assistant director for public relations at Johnson & Johnson recalls how the company reacted in the

first days of the crisis: “We got a call from a Chicago news reporter. He told us that the medical examiner there had just given a press conference-people were dying from poisoned Tylenol. He wanted our comment. As it was the first knowledge we had here in this department, we told him we knew nothing about it. In that first call we learned more from the reporter than he did from us.” Andrew’s dilemma points out something that has become more prevalent with the expansion of 24 hour electronic media. The media will often be the first on the scene, thus have information about the crisis before the organization does (Berge, 1990).

Johnson & Johnson chairman, James Burke, reacted to the negative media coverage by forming a seven-member strategy team. The team’s strategy guidance from Burke was first, “How do we protect the people?” and second “How do we save this product?” The company’s first actions were to immediately alerted consumers across the nation, via the media, not to consume any type of Tylenol product. They told consumers not to resume using the product until the extent of the tampering could be determined. Johnson & Johnson, along with stopping the production and advertising of Tylenol, withdraw all Tylenol capsules from the store shelves in Chicago and the surrounding area. After finding 2 more contaminated bottles Tylenol realized the vulnerability of the product and ordered a national withdraw of every capsule (Broom, 1994).

By withdrawing all Tylenol, even though there was little chance of discovering more cyanide laced tablets; Johnson & Johnson showed that they were not willing to take a risk with the public’s safety, even if it cost the company millions of dollars. The end result was the public viewing Tylenol as the unfortunate victim of a malicious crime (Broom, 1994).

Johnson & Johnson also used the media, both PR and paid advertising to communicate their strategy during the crisis. Johnson & Johnson used the media to issue a national alert to tell the public not to use the Tylenol product. In the first

week of the crisis Johnson & Johnson established a 1-800 hot line for consumers to call. The company used the 1-800 number to respond to inquires from customers concerning safety of Tylenol. They also establish a toll-free line for news organizations to call and receive pre-taped daily messages with updated statements about the crisis (Berge, 1990).

Before the crisis Johnson & Johnson had not actively sought press coverage, but as a company in crisis they recognized the benefits of open communications in clearly disseminating warnings to the public as well as the company's stand (Broom, 1994).

Several major press conferences were held at corporate headquarters. Within hours an internal video staff set up a live television feed via satellite to the New York metro area. This allowed all press conferences to go national. Jim Burke got more positive media exposure by going on 60 Minutes and the Donahue show and giving the public his command messages (Fink, 1986).

Johnson & Johnson communicated their new triple safety seal packaging- a glued box, a plastic sear over the neck of the bottle, and a foil seal over the mouth of the bottle, with a press conference at the manufacturer's headquarters. Tylenol became the first product in the industry to use the new tamper resistant packaging just 6 months after the crisis occurred (Berge, 1990).

Secondary Evidence

The initial media reports focused on the deaths of American citizens from a trusted consumer product. In the beginning the product tampering was not known, thus the media made a very negative association with the brand name.

All 3 networks lead with the Tylenol story on the first day of the crisis. CBS put a human face on the story which contained

the following: “When 12 year-old Mary Kellerman of Elk Grove Village, Ill., awoke at dawn with cold symptoms; her parents gave her one Extra-Strength Tylenol and sent her back to bed. Little did they know, they would wake up at 7:00 a.m. to find their daughter dying on the bathroom floor.” (Kaplin, pg. 1, 1998) The print media weighed in with equally damaging headlines: Time Magazine, “Poison Madness in the Midwest,” Newsweek, “The Tylenol Scare,” The Washington Post, “Tylenol, Killer or Cure.”

The media was not only focused on the deaths but it was also pervasive. Throughout the crisis over 100,000 separate news stories ran in U.S. newspapers, and hundreds of hours of national and local television coverage. A post crisis study by Johnson & Johnson said that over 90 percent of the American population had heard of the Chicago deaths due to cyanide-laced Tylenol within the first week of the crisis. Two news clipping services found over 125,000 news clippings on the Tylenol story. One of the services claimed that this story had been given the widest US news coverage since the assassination of President John F. Kennedy (Kaplin, 1998).

Media reporting would continue to focus on Tylenol killing people until more information about what caused the deaths was made available. In most crises media will focus on the sensational aspects of the crisis, and then follow with the cause as they learn more about what happened.

Scholarly Journals

Scholars have come to recognize Johnson & Johnson’s handling of the Tylenol crisis as the example for success when confronted with a threat to an organization’s existence. Berge lauds the case in the following manner, “The Tylenol crisis is without a doubt the most exemplary case ever known in the history of crisis communications. Any business executive, who

has ever stumbled into a public relations ambush, ought to appreciate the way Johnson & Johnson responded to the Tylenol poisonings. They have effectively demonstrated how major business has to handle a disaster.” (pg.19,1990)

The Tylenol case was the bases for many of the crisis communications strategies developed by researchers over the last 20 years. Berg’s suffering strategy and Benoit’s Rectification strategies both were developed from doing case studies of how Johnson & Johnson handled the Tylenol poisonings (Coombs,1995).

Discussion

The crises category in the Johnson & Johnson Tylenol case is Terrorism. Combs defines terrorism as intentional actions taken by external actors designed to harm the organization directly (hurt employees or customers) or indirectly (reduce sales or disrupt production). Product tampering, hostage taking, sabotage, and workplace violence are examples of terrorism. The violent, outside agent promotes attributions of external locus and uncontrollability.

The Tylenol product tampering clearly fits the Terrorism category. An external agent, presumably, acted to hurt the customers and possibly the employees of Johnson & Johnson. The other categories, Faux Pas, Accidents, or Transgression do not fit in the Tylenol case, so there was no cross-categorization in this case.

Crisis Response Strategies used by Johnson & Johnson

Johnson & Johnson employed Forgiveness and Sympathy

strategy for this crisis. Forgiveness strategy seeks to win forgiveness from the various publics and create acceptance for the crisis.

Johnson & Johnson used Remediation and Rectification, both Forgiveness strategies, in the Tylenol crisis. Remediation offers some form of compensation to help victims of the crisis. Johnson & Johnson provided the victim's families counseling and financial assistance even though they were not responsible for the product tampering. Negative feelings by the public against Johnson & Johnson were lessened as the media showed them take positive actions to help the victim's families (Berg, 1990).

Rectification involves taking action to prevent a recurrence of the crisis in the future. Johnson & Johnson's development of Triple sealed packaging is an example of rectification. They also developed new random inspection procedures before the shipment of Tylenol to retailers (Berg, 1990).

Sympathy strategy was a big component of Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication strategy. Sympathy strategy wins support from the public by portraying the organization as the unfair victim of an attack from an outside entity. Johnson & Johnson's willingness to accept losses by pulling the Tylenol product developed sympathy with the public (Berg & Robb, 1992).

The Johnson & Johnson Tylenol crisis is an example of how an organization should communicate with the various publics during a crisis. The organization's leadership set the example from the beginning by making public safety the organizations number one concern. This is particularly important given the fact that Johnson & Johnson's main mission with Tylenol is to enhance the public's well-being or health.

Although Johnson & Johnson's leadership performed superbly during the crisis there were some important areas Tylenol improved upon after the crisis. Johnson & Johnson did not have a proactive public affairs program before the crisis.

The only media relations engaged in by Johnson & Johnson was in the advertising and marketing area. In the early stages of the crisis Tylenol was informed about what was going on from a Chicago reporter. If this particular reporter had been more contentious or adversarial the whole crisis may have taken on a different form in the public's perception.

Johnson & Johnson's failure to employ/establish a positive relationship with the media, a key stakeholder, forced the company to respond to the crisis in an advertising-like manner. Johnson & Johnson received criticism from the media for not being genuine due to the slick sales-like response ads run during the crisis. The personal messages with the media from the CEO of the organization enabled Johnson & Johnson to overcome this problem.

Today Johnson & Johnson has completely recovered its market share lost during the crisis. The organization was able to reestablish the Tylenol brand name as one of the most trusted over-the-counter consumer products in America. Johnson & Johnson's handling of the Tylenol crisis is clearly the example other companies should follow if they find themselves on the brink of losing everything.

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Case Study #4: Surprise Strike Against UPS

United Parcel Service (UPS), the world's largest transportation and logistics company, faced a difficult set of challenges as the year 1997 began. The company, founded in 1907, plays a vital role in both the American and global economy. UPS serves more than 200 countries and territories and delivers billions of packages per year—tens of millions of packages per day. In 2022, the company saw its revenue top \$100 billion (USD). In short, the company is enormous and millions of people rely on it.

Before the Crisis

UPS had a long and, for the most part, positive relationship with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, the union that has represented UPS employees since the 1920s. In 1997, that relationship would be severely tested and the resulting impact on the company would be profound.

Negotiations with the Teamsters began in early January of 1997, even though the existing contract didn't expire until August 1st. UPS negotiates a national contract with the union every four-to-six years and, prior to 1997, there had never been a national strike by the union against UPS. The company is the largest employer of Teamsters in the country, with 225,000 workers.

The president of the Teamsters was Ron Carey, a former UPS

driver from New York City, who—according to many accounts—had left the company with a profound dislike for UPS. Carey had won re-election as president of the Teamsters in 1996, an election that later resulted in an investigation based on allegations of illegal fund-raising and kickbacks. As negotiations with the Teamsters began, Carey's opponents within the union were attacking him, seeking to erode his support and petitioning for new elections. Many believed there was a high likelihood that the federal investigation would result in Carey's election being overturned. Although UPS was not aware of the union's internal controversy as negotiations began, Carey had been quietly preparing the union for a strike. He needed to make a show of force and leadership to galvanize his support in anticipation of re-running for the presidency if the election was nullified.

At the start of negotiations, the primary issues focused on traditional areas such as wages and health and retirement benefits. But two other areas proved to be far more important, especially in the communication battle that developed as negotiations began to break down. One of these was job security. UPS had utilized part-time employees for many years and the Teamsters wanted the company to commit to the creation of a higher percentage of full-time jobs.

A second underlying issue that heavily influenced the negotiations was control of the pensions for UPS employees in the union. At the time negotiations began, the Teamsters union controlled the pension fund, one of the largest funds in the United States. UPS questioned how the fund was being managed, wanted to ensure the future pension security of its employees, and wanted a separate pension fund for its employees who were Teamsters.

As the negotiations began to deteriorate, the company began planning contingencies at all levels, including public relations. In 1997, UPS was still a privately held company. The public relations department had 10 management employees

and a budget of \$5 million in the United States (which was small for a company of its enormous size). There were few trained spokespeople, as the company did not have the public disclosure obligations typical of publicly traded firms. The public relations department functions included product publicity, financial communications, reputation management, and executive communications through a speaker's bureau. The PR department was also responsible for overall message development, crisis management, sponsorships, and event support. However, it was understaffed and underfunded to deal effectively with the global attention UPS was about to face.

The contract negotiations continued to unravel throughout the summer of 1997 and culminated with the Teamsters rejecting UPS's final contract offer on July 30th. At that point, federal mediators intervened and continued negotiations through August 3rd. As the talks concluded at the end of the day, the union indicated it would return to the table the next day.

The Crisis Begins

Without any forewarning, the Teamsters union announced to its members that evening that it would strike. Ron Carey held a press conference early in the morning on August 4th confirming a national strike and encouraging all UPS workers to walk out. The Teamsters had been developing a full-court media blitz, which they launched that day with a well-coordinated campaign using television, radio, and print.

The UPS strike instantly became the top national and local news story throughout the United States. The strike affected operations in more than 1,800 locations in all 50 states and generated media interest in virtually every city. The UPS public relations office received more than 20,000 phone calls during

the strike. According to Ken Sternad, who headed the function at the time, “We got slaughtered in the press.”

The strike lasted 15 days and had a severe impact on U.S. and global commerce, costing UPS \$750 million in lost revenue and related expenses. In the view of Sternad, the Teamsters won the communication battle largely because they had “key messages that played well.”

“They focused their messaging around the theme of ‘Part-time America won’t work’ and that caught on with the media,” said Sternad. “The Teamsters had clearly tested and researched this message and the others they used. They communicated early and often, including holding twice-daily press briefings in Washington, DC. The Teamsters stayed in control of the message and it worked for them.”

Sternad also pointed to the way in which the union put a human face on the issue by showcasing unhappy UPS workers, especially those with part-time employment. They effectively engaged third-party experts and made effective use of the Internet (still an emerging communications medium at the time).

Crisis Response

During the strike, UPS established a clear set of guiding principles and never wavered from these. The company’s number one objective was to get a good contract; winning the public relations battle was not an objective. “We had decided early on that we would not attack the union leadership and not make our people a target,” remembers Sternad. He continued,

We knew that we would need our people with us for the long term and we didn’t want to do or say anything that would tarnish the image of the UPS driver. They will always be the face of the company and our link to our customers and we didn’t want to alienate them.

In preparing for the strike, UPS did have a formal crisis communications plan in place and they had developed a specific communications plan in the event of a strike. The public relations team had compiled extensive facts and figures about the company and had trained regional spokespeople in advance of a strike. They had also identified third-party experts who could point out the many positives of the company.

In retrospect, the company acknowledges that they could have done a better job of handling the communication before and during the strike. Said Sternad,

We had essentially no communications in the first 24 hours. Our messages simply didn't resonate with the media or the general public, including our customers. We realized that we had not adequately tested our messages before or during the crisis. And we were much slower to utilize the web than the Teamsters. In the end we just didn't have the proper resources aligned to manage the crisis.

UPS learned valuable lessons from the experience that have served them well in preparing for future crises. Sternad noted,

The real work begins before the crisis hits. The PR team must make decisions for the long-term and stay focused on priorities. As in all crises, the first hours are the most critical. How the company responds initially sets the tone for the rest of the crisis period. That is why advance research is so critical. Message testing is fundamental to effective communications, but it must be done before the crisis hits.

We also saw clearly that in your messages you need steak *and* sizzle, facts along with powerful images that touch people's emotions, not just their intellect. We now cultivate and use third parties on an ongoing basis so that we know them and they know us long before a crisis. We maintain standby web sites that can be turned on instantly in the event of a crisis. As painful as it was

at the time, I think we're a much stronger and better prepared company because of this experience.

Aftermath

Though UPS may have failed to get its point across in the heat of the 1997 battle, the longer term story turned out differently. After the strike was settled, Teamsters president Ron Carey was removed from office, expelled from the union, and banned from participating in labour activities for life as a result of his involvement with election irregularities.

The Teamsters had retained control of the pension plan after the 1997 strike, but its financial health continued to erode in the years that followed. Pension benefits were cut, the retirement age was raised, and UPS ultimately negotiated a separate pension plan for more than 40,000 of its Teamster employees previously in the union plan. It cost UPS more than \$6 billion to exit the union plan and cover its liabilities, compared to a fraction of that amount it would have cost if they had been granted control in 1997.

Following the resolution of the strike, UPS saw its strongest growth and most profitable years in 1998 and 1999. In 1999, UPS became a publicly traded company through the largest initial public offering of its stock in the history of Wall Street.

A year later, UPS was named by *Forbes* magazine as its "Company of the Year."

Key Learning Point

Although UPS ultimately overcame the setbacks it incurred from the Teamsters strike of 1997, the company would have much preferred avoiding the strike altogether. Clearly, the

strike had an adverse impact on the company's reputation, an impact that took years to reverse. The case demonstrates the importance of developing and maintaining relationships, even with those whom you may feel are adversaries. In this case, the company underestimated the Teamsters willingness to call for a strike. They also miscalculated the underlying resentment of Teamsters members toward the company. Once the strike was under way, the company began to regain its footing. Management consciously chose not to vilify its employees, even though they had walked off the job. This strategy proved to be a key in limiting the long-term damage from the strike and allowing UPS to recover its reputation and rebuild labour relations within a relatively short time.

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Case Study #5: PETA Denuded

By Lauren Dallow and Neetu Lakhan, 2018

Background

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) was founded in 1980 (PETA, n.d.). Over the decades, PETA has grown into a global organization with millions of members, making it the largest animal rights organization in the world (n.d.). PETA works through public education, cruelty investigations, research, animal rescue, legislation, special events, celebrity involvement, and protest campaigns (n.d.).

Committed to protecting the rights of animals, PETA believes that animals are not meant to be eaten, worn, experimented on, or used for entertainment (PETA, n.d.). These are the four areas where PETA believes that the most animals suffer and so they are the four areas where PETA focuses its attention (n.d.).

The Campaign

One of PETA's earlier campaigns was the "I'd Rather Go Naked than Wear Fur" campaign launched in 1991 (Rose, 2012). The purpose of this campaign was to use celebrity spokespeople to discourage the public from wearing leather, fur, and wool. The campaign is still going on and has featured such notable people as Pamela Anderson, Kourtney Kardashian, Naomi

Campbell, and Olivia Munn, photographed naked with slogans added such as “Fur? I’d rather go naked” (Bousquet, 2017).

PETA tends to choose celebrities who are often viewed as sex symbols to pose for these images; a number of the celebrity spokespeople have been models or Playboy Playmates. One could infer that PETA subscribes to the advertising cliché that “sex sells,” as they use this strategy not just for their print public service announcements, but also for public protests (PETA, n.d.; Sheppard, 2014).

Criticisms

PETA has become well known for provocative naked or semi-naked campaigns and, even though it has garnered negative public reactions, PETA appears to feel that, even if people are complaining, at least they are talking about the issues. Nothing yet has discouraged PETA from using controversial images to deploy their message. In October, 2017, a graphic billboard went up in Detroit for a related campaign that featured R&B singer DΔWN naked with a section of her skin being torn off; the billboard reads “Leather is a rip-off” (PETA, 2017).

Of course, PETA’s strategy of using naked—often female—celebrities to pose for the “I’d Rather Be Naked” campaign has led to criticism that PETA is relying on sexist attitudes and the male gaze to draw attention to the cause (Pennington, 2013). Additionally, the images are argued to be dehumanizing the women featured in the images (Orbay-Cerrato, 2013). Yet, PETA stands by this strategy and continues to employ it, but the strategy does not actually seem that effective.

Analysis

While provocative ads are more likely to grab attention, the attention is short lived and viewers tend not to think critically about ads that feature sexual images (Reichert, Heckler, & Jackson, 2001). PETA's ads in the "I'd Rather Be Naked" campaign feature minimal print and the naked images do not explain why PETA wants the public to be against wearing fur, wool, and leather. Therefore, viewers must go online and do their own research into the topic, which is unlikely if the image has little or no lasting effect (Reichert, Heckler, & Jackson, 2001).

The effectiveness of the current strategy employed by PETA for their campaigns becomes apparent when examining whether fur sales have been at all impacted in the time that PETA has been running the "I'd Rather Be Naked" campaign. From 2000–2010, global fur sales rose about 70% and annual sales of fur pelts reached \$15-16 billion between 2010 – 2011 (Sauers, 2012). This is a painful indictment of the failure of PETA's campaign. Additionally, designers who had not used fur before were starting to add fur pieces to their runway collections, as fur became a trend once again (Sauers, 2012). Despite widespread efforts over a number of years by PETA, fur sales were booming, proving that, at least in this case, sex did not sell.

Compounding Problems

The revolving door of celebrity spokespeople has caused PETA some embarrassment, as some of the celebrities who posed for PETA in the past have taken to wearing fur again. Both Cindy Crawford and Naomi Campbell modelled fur after posing for the "I'd Rather Go Naked" campaign (Rose, 2012). Other celebrity spokespeople, such as Khloe Kardashian, have since

cut ties with PETA, giving the appearance that PETA is not very selective in choosing their spokespeople (Rose, 2012). Indeed, campaigns must ensure that celebrities are truly committed to their cause, otherwise a reversal, such as noted here, will do more harm than good, undermining the campaign more than supporting it.

Key Learning Point

The main lessons learned for PR practitioners from PETA's "I'd Rather Go Naked" campaign should be that using sex to push an agenda is often not the best choice and to be wary of using well-known public figures as spokespeople. Provocative images do not have a lasting effect on viewers and viewers are unlikely to go through the effort to research a cause further, simply because the campaign features sexualized images. Additionally, if an organization chooses to make use of celebrity spokespeople, they must be selective of who they recruit for their cause and be aware that the individual's future actions may reflect poorly on the organization.

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Case Study #6: Bud Light & Social Media Influencer Dylan Mulvaney

By: Charlene Co and Chidinma Obi Odunukwe, 2023

On April 1, 2023, American beer producer Bud Light sent influencer Dylan Mulvaney customized Bud Light beer cans that featured her image to celebrate the anniversary of her gender transition. Mulvaney, a trans influencer who rose to fame as she documented her transition, went on to [post a video](#) of herself on her social media accounts dressed as the character of Holly Golightly in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, toasting to “March Madness” and “**day 365 of womanhood**” (Mulvaney, 2023). In the post, which was a paid sponsorship, she also encouraged people to send videos of themselves carrying Bud Light beers for a chance to win US \$15,000 (Mulvaney, 2023). The video was posted on her Instagram and TikTok accounts, where Mulvaney had over 1.8 million and over 10 million followers, respectively.

The post went viral. While some cheered Mulvaney on (Walsh, 2023), the post spurred fury among Bud Light's consumer base—notably far-right conservatives—followed by calls to boycott the brand (Stewart, 2023). Among the high-profile protestors were American rocker Kid Rock, who was seen [shooting cans of Bud Light](#) while spewing expletives (Kid Rock, 2023); country artists John Rich and Travis Tritt severed ties with the beer, saying they're banning the brand from their tour (Daw, 2023). On the other hand, podcaster Joe Rogan and

radio jock Howard Stern weighed in, calling the vicious reactions exaggerated (Di Placido, 2023).

As discussions surrounding the backlash and the reaction (or lack thereof) from parent company Anheuser-Busch continued in the following weeks, so did reports of Budweiser's sales dipping. At the end of April, there were reports that Bud Light sales had fallen more than 11% (Philipps, 2023); on May 13, sales were reportedly down by 28.4% (Wile, 2023). In early June, Budweiser was reported to have lost the bragging rights as the “#1 Selling Beer Brand,” with Modelo Especial taking the coveted spot (Revel, 2023).

Actions Taken

Anheuser-Busch releases a statement (*April 3, 2023*)

In the face of growing criticism, on April 3, Anheuser-Busch, maker and parent company of Bud Light, defended its decision to work with Dylan Mulvaney as a brand influencer through a released statement:

“Anheuser-Busch works with hundreds of influencers across our brands as one of many ways to authentically connect with audiences across various demographics. From time to time, we produce unique commemorative cans for fans and brand influencers like Mulvaney. This commemorative can was a gift to celebrate a personal milestone and is not for sale to the general public.” (Hur, 2023)

The company's first attempt at alleviating the situation was widely ill-received. Critics saw the statement as refusing to take

a side or, at the very least, standing by its decision to take on Mulvaney as a paid ambassador (Bronner, 2023).

CEO releases a statement (*April 14, 2023*)

Two weeks after the Mulvaney post, Anheuser-Busch CEO Brendan Whitworth issued a statement titled “Our Responsibility to America,” which stated that they “never intended to be part of a discussion that divides people. We are in the business of bringing people together over a beer” (Anheuser-Busch, 2023).

Whitworth adds that he is “responsible for ensuring every consumer feels proud of the beer we brew” and mentions the number of people the company and its distributors employ. “We have thousands of partners, millions of fans and a proud history supporting our communities, military, first responders, sports fans and hard-working Americans everywhere,” he said (Anheuser-Busch, 2023).

Social media (in)action (*April 14, 2023*)

There was no activity on Bud Light's Instagram account for two weeks after the Mulvaney post. On April 14, it shared a photo of a beer on Instagram with the caption: “TGIF?” Some of its followers were disappointed with the brand's silence and expressed their dissatisfaction in the comment section, none of which Bud Light addressed. Bud Light then turned off the option to comment on their posts.

Leadership shakeup (*April 27, 2023*)

Alissa Heinerscheid, VP of Marketing for Bud Light, and marketing executive Daniel Blake took a leave of absence, with Budweiser global marketing VP Todd Allen taking over in the interim (*Springer, 2023*). The company said that this move was part of streamlining its marketing structure, so it can “maintain focus on the things we do best: brewing great beer for all consumers, while always making a positive impact in our communities and on our country” (*Beer, 2023*).

Cancellations of April events

Citing safety concerns amid alleged employee threats, a Budweiser distributor in Springfield, Missouri, cancelled all planned appearances of the Clydesdale horses following the Mulvaney backlash (*Zymeri, 2023*). The Clydesdales horses, which have grown as a symbol of the repeal of the prohibition of beer in the 1930s, have been an integral part of Anheuser-Busch’s marketing and advertising for decades (*Anheuser-Busch, n.d.*), even being featured in Super Bowl commercials—the penultimate annual advertising moment for an American beer company.

PR Learnings

By collaborating with Dylan Mulvaney, Bud Light detached from its core audience.

This Bud Light campaign violated the cardinal rule of

communication, which is to know your audience and put them first (Schechter, 2023). Historically, Budweiser's ads and promotions revolved around its sponsorships and partnerships with sports teams and major sporting events, with a message that a Bud Light, or a Budweiser, can be best enjoyed while watching a sports game; this strongly suggested that Bud Light has a male-dominated target market. The brand's core value is that Budweiser "brings people together for game time" (Budweiser, n.d.).

And this worked: according to Beer Marketer's Insights, Anheuser-Busch held roughly 39% of the beer market in the United States in 2021 (National Beer Wholesalers Association, n.d.).

Interestingly, however, Bud Light has, in fact, created inclusive campaigns in the past. In 2016, the brand launched the "Bud Light Party" campaign that featured American comedians, Seth Rogan and Amy Schumer, in an ad meant to "champion the brand's message of inclusivity among modern beer drinkers and bringing people together" (Anheuser-Busch, n.d.). This invites a question: did Bud Light try to ascertain the political "threshold limits" of its primary audience regarding the LGBTQ conversation? Did it, perhaps, push the envelope a bit too far for its customers' political leanings with the Dylan Mulvaney campaign?

The company gave a cowardly and tepid response to an issue both sides felt very strongly about.

The company failed to take a definitive stand on the issue: does it fiercely defend its decision to make Mulvaney a brand ambassador and, by extension, stand by its support for the

LGBTQ community, or will it side with its established far-right consumer base?

While its first released statement attempted to defend the move to have Mulvaney as a brand ambassador, it needed more determination; the statement gave the impression that the brand was sitting on the fence and refused to take a side. It was a missed opportunity to reinforce the company's direction to be more inclusive. The second statement from the CEO read like a sanitized canned response, which, despite its length, did not say anything substantial that spoke to the intense emotions felt by either side.

Bud Light did too little and too late.

Mulvaney posted the video on April 1 and immediately received backlash. This issue was kept in the media for most of the month, with reports of dropping sales attributed to the controversy coming in well into the two months that followed. Bud Light's responses were few and far between. Presumably, the company thought that people would eventually lose interest by not bringing more attention to it. Instead, this silence led to a flurry of theories and misinformation.

Rumors swirled that no one at a senior level at Anheuser-Busch knew about the partnership. At the same time, a satirical website published a post that claimed Anheuser-Busch let the marketing team behind this campaign go. It was shared by social media users as fact, prompting the company to confirm that "there is no truth to that statement" and reiterated that the commemorative beer can sent to Mulvaney with her face on it was not intended for wider release (Tulp, 2023).

A problem of mixed messaging: Is Bud Light, in fact, for everyone, or loyal to its most ardent fans?

Today, brands face the conundrum of whether they must re-think their marketing and communications strategies so that they resonate more with ethical and socially responsible consumers—or, as some might put it, the “woke” generation of customers. While admirable and not to mention long overdue, if not done thoughtfully, these well-meaning intentions can cause brands to venture into politically dangerous territory where they might find themselves back-pedaling on their words because they are caught in the crossfire between the new customers they want to reach and the established ones who served them well in the past. The Bud Light-Dylan Mulvaney case study is case in point.

Bud Light’s VP of marketing, Alissa Heinerscheid, was always vocal about her desire to make the brand more inclusive. In a March 30, 2023, podcast, she said she wanted to trade the brand’s “fratty” reputation for “inclusivity” (Avarre, 2023). While the mandate is admirable, the manner with which its parent company responded to this issue questions whether this new direction has the buy-in of upper management.

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Case Study #7: Citizen Activism and Col. Muammar Gaddafi

In late 2009, the leader of Libya, Col. Muammar Gaddafi (sometimes spelled “Qaddafi”), visited the United States for the purpose of addressing the United Nations (UN) general assembly. His visit to the United States motivated an outburst of citizen activism, from which PR practitioners can learn about many of the principles of citizens acting on behalf of a cause or belief and pressuring the government to aid in their efforts.

Background

First, a brief look at the history of American–Libyan relations, specifically those with Col. Gaddafi, provides important context for this case of citizen activism. In 1979, the United States embassy in Libya was attacked by a mob and set on fire, causing the withdrawal of all U.S. government personnel. Col. Gaddafi directly and publicly claimed responsibility for the 1988 terrorist bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 in which 270 people died over Scotland, including many Syracuse University students returning home from a study abroad program. Diplomatic relations with Libya were not reopened until 2006. However, much hostility remained over the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 and Libya’s other support of terrorist activities.

Col. Gaddafi was known for taking a Bedouin tent with him on foreign visits. A recent occasion in which this tent was problematic was when he requested to erect it on President

Sarkozy's grounds in Paris in 2007, a move that caused consternation and reportedly "flummoxed presidential protocol service" (Sage, 2007).

Gaddafi erected this tent when he traveled to Belgium for official talks in 2004 and again when he visited Rome in 2009, using the tent to receive official guests. However, these European nations do not consider themselves as personally affected by the terrorist actions of Gaddafi in Libya. These European countries have lower problem recognition with Col. Gaddafi than do Americans. The level of involvement that Americans experience is higher than that of Europeans, both from the burning of the U.S. Embassy, severed diplomatic relations, and the Libyan terrorist downing of flight 103. High levels of both problem recognition and involvement, coupled with a feeling that one can personally impact the situation (known as low constraint recognition) all contribute to the rise of an activist public.

To further complicate matters with America, general outrage ensued when Scotland decided to release from prison the terrorist who was responsible for bombing Pan Am flight 103. The convicted terrorist, Abdelbaset al-Megrahi, was released just weeks before Gaddafi's UN address to the general assembly. Al-Megrahi received a hero's welcome upon return to Libya, while the families of many American victims watched the news stories vented their outrage in television interviews, letters to the editor, tweets, and blogs.

Activists are Heard

When Gaddafi and his associates began planning his trip to speak at the United Nations, to take place on September 22, 2009, they also began looking for a place to erect the Libyan tent. The Libyan embassy owns property in suburban New Jersey, where Gaddafi planned to stay and erect a tent.

However, after public demonstrations outside the property, the town of Englewood, New Jersey, blocked Gaddafi from erecting the tent. Residents protesting Gaddafi's potential stay in the Libyan mission spoke frequently to the news media. Syracuse University alumni also appeared on broadcasts voicing their outrage at Gaddafi visiting the very state of that university.

Gaddafi petitioned to assemble the tent in Central Park, but New York City planning and other governmental officials also rejected that request. Finding no home for the tent, the Libyan delegation resorted to subterfuge, impersonation, and using intermediaries to find a temporary place for Col. Gaddafi in the United States.

At this point, Gaddafi's delegation impersonated Dutch officials and attempted to rent space for Gaddafi's tent on the roof of a Manhattan townhouse, but that deal fell through. Gaddafi used intermediaries to rent a Bedford, New York, estate owned by Donald Trump. Aerial photos taken from helicopters buzzed on the news media as the Bedouin tent was constructed on the 113 acre estate, known as "Seven Springs." As Gaddafi wound up his 90-minute address to the UN general assembly, outrage was growing in Bedford. Citizens and media began to congregate at the front gate of the estate, and media helicopters circled. Bedford town attorney Joel Sachs said a stop work order was issued on the tent just after 5 P.M. because it is illegal to build a temporary residence without a permit. News anchors commented on the power of citizen activists. Helicopters provided visuals of the tent being deconstructed that played across media outlets for the rest of the day.

Clearly, Gaddafi underestimated the power of activist publics operating within a representative government to prevent him from engaging in the "normal" activities of a dictator. The day following the stop work order on the tent, after it was taken down, work began again to build the tent. However, Gaddafi did not visit the tent, as is his usual custom, to receive state

visitors or other official visits. Perhaps Gaddafi had finally understood the message issued by activist publics and governmental officials at their behest. The battle over where Gaddafi could pitch his tent was easily won by civic activists, demonstrators, and governmental officials who acted on behalf of residents in their districts. Perhaps the case of erecting a tent is a small one, but it demonstrates that a committed group of organized activists can push their way into the media agenda and influence world events, such as the terms by which international diplomacy are conducted.

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Case Study #8: Home Depot's Leadership Crisis

In January, 2007, Home Depot was facing a leadership crisis. After months of pressure from shareholders, the company's board of directors ousted high-profile CEO Robert Nardelli and replaced him with a much less visible executive named Frank Blake. The stylistic differences could not have been more striking.

Though both Nardelli and Blake joined Home Depot from General Electric, they seemed to come from different planets. Nardelli was regarded as a tough authoritarian manager who shunned much of the cultural foundation of Home Depot and gave a cold shoulder to its founders, Arthur Blank and Bernard Marcus (¹

Values-Driven Approach

Blake decided from early on to try to reconnect Home Depot to its roots. Whereas Nardelli and his team had enjoyed catered lunches on the top floor of the headquarters building, Blake instructed the senior executives to eat in the first floor cafeteria with everyone else and pay for it themselves. He reached out to

1. Based on interviews with Brad Shaw, September, 2009, and Home Depot, Inc., 2009).

Blank and Marcus and asked them to serve as advisers as the company worked to reconnect with its customers.

Blake based his communication platform on two images, one called “the value wheel” and the other “the inverted pyramid” (see [Figure 11.1 “Home Depot’s Value Wheel”](#) and [Figure 11.2 “Home Depot’s Inverted Pyramid”](#)).

Figure 11.1 Home Depot’s Value Wheel



Source: Used by permission of Home Depot, Inc. (2009).

Figure 11.2 Home Depot's Inverted Pyramid



Source: Used by permission of Home Depot, Inc. (2009).

In his talks with employees, Blake began showing the Value Wheel and Inverted Pyramid from the very first day of his tenure as CEO. The wheel portrayed Home Depot's core values and the inverted pyramid emphasized that the company's most important objective was the focus on customers and the frontline associates who directly served them.

Blake coupled this outreach to employees with some strategic decisions, as well. He made the difficult decision to spin off HD Supply, one of Nardelli's pet initiatives, and invest instead in the core retail business. At the same time, new

investments were made in improving frontline customer service.

Two-Way Communication

To get the message across to associates, Blake made use of some existing Home Depot channels. For example, all 300,000 Home Depot associates are required to take a monthly safety and protection quiz. The company tracks participation in this essential activity. Blake decided to use one minute of the quiz each month to present a brief message to all frontline associates. He also asked employees to offer suggestions on how to improve the company through an existing In-Box program. Even though headquarters receives from 300 to 400 of these ideas each week, Blake reads them all.

As Brad Shaw, Home Depot's head of communication, explained,

We've taken our frontline associates and given them ongoing access to the CEO. Frank used to be practically unknown and now he's instantly recognized when he visits our stores. We bring in frontline folks, 20 year associates, on a regular basis and Frank meets with them to provide an opportunity to reflect on what has made HD great. We haven't changed the tools we use, we've changed the message (2)

Shaw maintains that the message conveyed by Blake's action is really quite simple. "You have to listen to your people," he says. "The days of centralized top-down communication are over. It's a two-way communication process. Frank understands that and our frontline associates understand it.

2. Interview with Brad Shaw, September, 2009).

We're working to educate our management in the middle of how important this is."

Blake has emphasized the need to listen to the frontline employees, particularly at the company's headquarters. When the CEO is reading the company suggestion box and spending time with frontline employees, other executives tend to follow the example. "What we're finding is that, when Frank asks a question about a comment he read in the In Box, other executives want to be prepared with answers, so they're paying closer attention to the comments themselves," says Shaw.

Investing in the Values Stated

In declaring the importance of the frontline employees, Home Depot has backed its words with definitive action. Though the company was coping with the impact of a recession along with other retailers, it chose to maintain retirement benefits for employees. Unlike many of its competitors, Home Depot is continuing to grant merit increases and has paid record employee bonuses. "Other companies are fighting not to lay people off," says Shaw. "We want to stay focused on enhancing Home Depot's reputation as a good place to work."

Home Depot is also seeing positive results in terms of increases in same-store sales, which have recently been better than its primary competitor. Even though the company's gross revenues have fallen, profit in recent periods has exceeded forecasts.

Blake's primary audiences remain customers and frontline employees, but he will occasionally grant media interviews if he feels they provide an opportunity to raise the company's profile, rather than his own. "Frank is authentically humble, he doesn't want media attention, but he will do it if we feel it is critically important in advancing other Home Depot messages," Shaw explains. He continued,

He is also active in social media on his own. In some cases he will respond to blog postings on his own. He is creating a presence in social media and we don't try to control that. It is about engagement and the best way to use social media is in an unfiltered way.

Positive Results

In Blake's first three years at the helm, the company showed marked improvement in customer service. An important measure that many retailers use is called the Net Promoter Score. The company collects over 150,000 responses from customers each week and counts only positive scores about its service that rate it 9 or above on a 10-point scale. By this measure, customer satisfaction has increased over 1,000 basis points in three years. "The example Frank uses is that he can pick up a bottle of packaged water and there is no direct correlation between that bottle of water and the employees who packaged it. It's not easily apparent if they are happy or not," Shaw observes. "But in our case if one of our employees is unhappy, you as a customer can feel it directly in the way they serve you."

The Home Depot and Frank Blake's example demonstrates the power of the chief executive officer also serving as a chief communicator to employees. In this case, it clearly achieved results.

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Case Study #9: Entergy Responds to Hurricane Katrina

Entergy is a large-scale utility operating primarily along the Gulf Coast of the United States. In the late summer and early fall of 2005, Entergy weathered the two worst hurricanes in the company's history within the same 26-day period: Hurricanes Katrina and Rita (B¹).

The one-two punch of these powerful storms devastated the region served by Entergy. Almost two million homes and businesses lost power during the height of the storms' wrath. Dozens of Entergy power generation plants were forced to close and thousands of miles of transmission and distribution lines were downed. In all, more than 1,700 structures and 28,892 utility poles were destroyed or damaged by the storms. It was devastation without precedent in modern times.

Crisis on Top of Crisis

For the communication team at Entergy, the crisis caused by Katrina and Rita was more severe than any they had ever experienced. The pressure to communicate quickly with Entergy employees, customers, communities, and other audiences was intense. To add to this pressure, members of

1. based on Entergy company documents, interviews with Art Wiese, 2009, and Entergy, 2009)

the communication team had themselves suffered losses from the storms. While they grappled with how to get their jobs done, they were also trying to cope with the loss of their own homes and the impact the hurricanes had caused in their own personal lives.

Arthur Wiese, Jr., Entergy's vice president of corporate communications, noted that "major storms are more than just an operational crisis for a utility company. They also pose major communications hurdles, directly impacting corporate reputation and the company's relationship with its employees, its shareholders, and its customers."

In Entergy's headquarters city, New Orleans, the damage was catastrophic. Thousands were dead or missing; tens of thousands were homeless. Electrical power was virtually nonexistent; the gas distribution system was inundated with corrosive saltwater; 1,500 displaced Entergy employees were scattered across the nation—from Los Angeles to Boston—after the company's evacuation on August 27. It was hard to know where to begin.

In the hours after the winds subsided and the scope of the damage became clear, Entergy faced multiple challenges. The company had to assemble the largest restoration workforce in its history to safely begin repairing the worst damage ever incurred to its system. To do this, Entergy had to address the logistical needs of its workers, providing a constant supply of food, water, and medication. It had to find shelter for the workforce, many of whom had lost homes. Entergy improvised a system to get workers their paychecks and to communicate with them in the absence of cell service, computers, and other traditional channels. In addition to meeting these basic human needs, Entergy needed to continue to manage its business, despite the fact that its corporate headquarters was shut down.

Preparation Makes the Difference

The communication team had actually begun preparing for Katrina long before the storm hit. As Katrina began bearing down on New Orleans, Entergy activated its system command center in Jackson, Mississippi, and moved a multidisciplinary team there on August 27, which was two days before Katrina made landfall. The command structure included additional transmission centers in Jackson and New Orleans, and distribution operations centers at utility operations headquarters in Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, and Arkansas.

At these headquarters, personnel began coordinating preparation efforts, recruiting outside restoration help through mutual assistance agreements with other utilities, and lined up safe staging areas for materials and crews. Additionally, customers and crews in the anticipated impact zone were put on alert, as arrangements were being made to support the lodging of crews once the restoration began.

The company had learned some valuable lessons in the aftermath of Hurricane Ivan, which had struck its service area the previous year. Hurricane Ivan was the strongest hurricane of the 2004 Atlantic hurricane season and it forced Entergy to mount a full company evacuation, which had not been done before. Employees were confused about their own responsibilities during the evacuation versus those that belonged to the company. For example, Ivan demonstrated the limits on the company's ability to provide evacuation lodging, which many employees had been expecting. Through the experience with Ivan, Entergy learned the importance of communicating clearly with employees about the differences between the company's responsibilities and the individual's responsibilities in a catastrophe.

Entergy assembled a cross-functional team in the spring of 2005 to address the lessons learned from the Ivan evacuation. The team found several key areas that posed problems for the

company. The past practice of individual business units independently implementing evacuation policies resulted in chaos, including internal competition for lodging. Many employees did not fully appreciate the potential danger of a major hurricane, since the area had not experienced a direct strike in decades.

Pro-Active Communications Planning and Training

The communications team targeted these areas of confusion and implemented a new communications plan. The goal was to educate employees on the company's new evacuation policies and procedures and to provide them with information to help them prepare their own individual hurricane evacuation plans. This approach emphasized the severity of the danger posed by a major hurricane and the need to plan ahead. The company needed to explain why it was implementing more consistent storm policies, and how these changes would help Entergy's ability to implement the storm restoration plan for customers.

Communication began with supervisors, who were sent talking points and an overview of materials that would be mailed to employees in June, 2005. They were also invited to attend a webcast that provided an overview of the changes and an opportunity to ask questions. These supervisors were asked to meet with their employees within two weeks to explain these changes and to distribute a communications packet outlining the new procedures.

The communications team also developed a new website titled "IESstormNet." This website was designed to communicate important information before, during, and after a natural disaster. This site was made available to both

employees and their families and promotional fliers were distributed that highlighted the information available through the site.

Preparing Customers for a Crisis

Entergy also wanted to make sure its customers were better prepared. In May, 2005, Entergy constructed a corporate communications plan that aimed to help customers better appreciate the challenges it would face in restoring service in the event of a major storm. Ivan had demonstrated how difficult it would be for Entergy to restore service quickly and the company wanted customers to better understand the challenges it would face in getting them back on line. Although Ivan was a serious storm, the company had no idea at the time just how bad the 2005 hurricane season would be.

Crisis in the Air; Response on the Ground

On August 29th, Katrina made landfall near New Orleans. Approximately 1,500 Entergy employees were forced to evacuate. They were scattered across the nation and hard to reach since cell phone circuits were overrun and conventional telephone service was wiped out.

The company had to utilize other methods to locate, mobilize, and inform the large restoration workforce. Entergy CEO J. Wayne Leonard sent out daily e-mails to over 14,000 employees, including those unaffected by the storm. An employee information line was kept up to date with recorded messages and detailed information. The recently created IEstormNet produced daily online newsletters, which were also printed and distributed at crew staging sites. Entergy posted

toll free numbers on its website and broadcast public service announcements on the radio asking employees to call in for information.

Maintaining employee morale during the restoration process was a major objective. Many employees had lost family members and friends to the storm. Their homes and possessions were damaged or destroyed by the winds and flood waters. These same people were being asked to work 18-hour shifts in hot, humid conditions, surrounded by unimaginable tragedy and destruction.

Slowly, conditions for the restoration force began to improve. By September 7th, the company had set up tent cities in seven locations throughout Louisiana and Mississippi, equipped with cots, food, water, and medical supplies for all of its workers. Entergy continued to pay workers until it found them jobs within the firm because it recognized the need to offer devastated employees incentives to come back to work.

Entergy CEO Leonard posted letters on IESstormNet and asked for supervisors to deliver them to crews at campsites and even in remote areas where they were working. These letters focused on the progress of the restoration efforts. In one letter, just days after Katrina hit, Leonard wrote, "Please work safely and know that this organization of caring people is working night and day to help you pull your life back together" ⁽²⁾

Putting People First

Just days after Katrina, Entergy established the "Power of Hope Fund," which aimed to help employees and customers rebuild their lives after the storms, with an initial corporate investment of \$1 million. To spread news of the Power of Hope Fund,

2. IESstormNet Update, 2006).

Entergy embarked on a two-week media campaign and spread the word via television, radio, print, and the internet. Over the period of a few months, the fund received over \$4 million in donations from around the world.

Entergy also established *Operation ReSTORE Hope*. This project had both distribution centers and a virtual store where people could donate clothes, furniture, and household supplies for employees. Entergy employee-volunteers and retirees staffed the distribution centers, which benefited more than 2,000 employees whose lives had been affected by the hurricanes.

The company provided redeployment coordinators in each major hub where displaced employees and their families would be relocating. These coordinators helped displaced employees and their families make a smooth transition to new work locations. They helped to provide valuable information on schools, neighborhoods, churches, local services, and resources available in the area.

Crisis on Top of Crisis

Only 26 days after Katrina, just as restoration was beginning to take hold, Hurricane Rita made landfall on September 24th as a Category 3 hurricane near the mouth of the Sabine River on the Texas-Louisiana border. Rita caused even greater damage to Entergy's transmission system, severing the ties between generating plants and customers, and plunging the area from Conroe, Texas, to Jennings, Louisiana, into darkness. Over 400 substations were knocked out of service. Rita brought damaging winds to the territory of all five utility subsidiaries in the Entergy system and interrupted service to over 750,000 customers. This second storm further complicated Entergy's efforts to restore service to customers, care for the human

needs of its employees, and maintain its viability as a public company.

Media as an Ally

Throughout the Katrina and Rita restoration, Entergy made every effort to maintain a mutually beneficial relationship with the media. Winning the media's support was critical to winning the support of public officials and Wall Street. Through past experience, the company had come to understand that the media's perceptions would be shaped in large measure by how well Entergy took care of its employees and customers.

Entergy used a strategy it called "One Voice" to work with the media. This strategy was effective in keeping the messages coming from all company representatives consistent and accurate during the restoration, thus minimizing any confusion about progress.

To achieve this objective, the company gave all company spokespersons, including the 45 communicators in its corporate communications department who were working on the storm restoration effort, the same sets of talking points up to four times a day to keep them informed. Entergy issued over 50 news releases and held multiple news conferences and media conference calls throughout the restoration.

Communication officials produced and managed over 40,000 radio ads, 15,000 television ads, and 700 newspaper ads. They participated in more than 300 conference calls or meetings and held dozens of coordination calls of its own to ensure the proper coordination of all messages being dispersed, both internally and externally³

Reporters were looking for complete access and unique story

3. Entergy, 2005).

angles regarding Entergy's restoration process. The media had been highly critical of the government's response to Katrina at the federal, state, and local levels. Entergy thus had to deal with individuals who were already skeptical of how the situation was being managed.

Using its "one voice" strategy, Entergy opened up its doors to the media. The company aggressively pushed its story with reporters and did virtually every interview that was requested. The company invited reporters to tour the command center and even to visit crews in the field. When Entergy used helicopters to assess the damage, a seat was usually reserved for a photographer or journalist.

Such transparency affected how the public and the government perceived Energy's restoration efforts by making available a steady flow of information to media outlets. The resulting media exposure in many cases boosted employee moral by projecting Entergy's workers as heroes.

Business Model Impact

After Katrina, Entergy New Orleans, Inc. (ENO), the smallest of Entergy's subsidiary companies, not only faced major damages to its infrastructure, but also a drastic reduction to its customer base in the city. Almost two months after Katrina, only 24% of Entergy's New Orleans customers had returned.

To protect its customers from drastic rate increases and to ensure continued progress in restoring power and gas service to New Orleans, Entergy Corporation filed a voluntary petition for bankruptcy reorganization on September 23, 2005. It also asked for federal funding to alleviate its financial situation.

Entergy faced opposition from the Bush Administration when asking for this federal funding. ENO had hoped to be included in a \$17.1 billion package passed by Congress in October, 2005, for Katrina relief, but the request was denied.

In the administration's view, federal aid for damage incurred in natural disasters rarely goes to private, for-profit companies such as Entergy. A long, bitter public struggle ensued over getting federal assistance that would enable ENO to limit rate hikes to its customers in New Orleans. By November, 2006, some federal funding began to appear. However, rate hikes for ENO customers were inevitable.

When funding from the federal government was in question, Entergy made predictions in June, 2006, that they would have to increase utility rates for its customers by 25%. However, by October, 2006, the Louisiana Recovery Authority had approved block grants the company sought to obtain with the [Chapter 11 "Ethics, Leadership and Counseling, and Moral Analyses"](#) filing. At the same time, improving conditions in the city had contributed to faster population growth. These factors led to a much more modest rate increase of 7.5%. Built into the rate increase was a plan to create a \$75 million storm reserve for future hurricanes (⁴

Lessons Learned

Entergy has learned a number of lessons from the Katrina and Rita restoration that have aided in the further development of its disaster response protocol. The company better understands that employees are its most important audience, surpassing even customers. If employees do not perform, company messages to other audiences are diminished. Entergy has also learned that it must anticipate significant emotional strain with its employees when they are faced with such difficult personal impacts.

As a company, Entergy was reminded of the importance of

4. IESstormNet Update, Entergy, 2006).

having detailed operational, communications, and business continuity plans and learned that they should conduct frequent drills to test these plans. When a major storm is approaching, communicators must move to a pre-equipped command center quickly.

Entergy also learned the importance of making its own evacuation decisions and not relying solely on the government. In reacting to the approach of Katrina, Entergy got a head start in relocating its hurricane command center—and ultimately its whole headquarters—to Jackson, Mississippi. This decision proved to be pivotal in allowing the restoration process to begin as quickly and effectively as possible.

Entergy also learned the value of having backup communication tactics with IESTormNet. When conventional communication systems were down, this internal website helped Entergy and its employees communicate much more effectively.

Finally, the company learned the importance of taking calculated risks, especially in dealing with the media. By opening its doors to the media and demonstrating the tangible steps it was taking with both employees and customers, Entergy was able to restore trust that had been damaged in the immediate aftermath of the storm. The focus on “one voice,” the accessibility of key executives, and the recognition that its employees were the most critical public for communication all enabled Entergy to emerge from the chaos of Katrina and Rita and regain its footing as a profitable and sustainable organization.

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Case Study #10: Purdue Pharma and the Opioid Crisis

By Lina Moskaleva, 2022

Background

Up until the mid-1990s, prescription opioid drugs were prescribed by medical professionals with extreme caution and only to patients with cancer and other terminal illnesses due to the potential for opioid abuse and addiction (Marks 2020). This posed a problem for pharmaceutical companies, such as Purdue Pharma, because it curbed their sales of opioid medications by limiting the patient market, the length of time for the prescription, and the level of dose prescribed. The focus of this case study is Purdue Pharma's pro-opioid campaign in the United States, from 1995 to the early 2000s.

Goals and Strategies

Purdue Pharma's goal was to increase their sales of opioid medications, in particular OxyContin. Their objective was to expand the market of patients using opioids and encourage the prescription of opioids for longer periods of time and at higher doses. They aimed to do this by downplaying the risks of addiction and stigmatizing those who became addicted and the doctors who raised concerns (Marks, 2020).

The strategy for Purdue Pharma was to change the public, political, and medical discourse about prescription opioid drugs. The campaign began in 1996, when OxyContin was created, and involved a multitude of tactics.

Messaging

In 1995, with permission from the US Food and Drug Administration, Purdue Pharma made an unsubstantiated claim that OxyContin's novel slow-release formulation was less appealing to drug abusers (Meier, 2018). This claim helped OxyContin's popularity until it became apparent by the early 2000s that the drug was just as easy to abuse as other painkillers.

In order to humanize their brand and expand their market, Purdue claimed that their product helped “the untreated patient in severe pain who is mobilized and given his life back” (Chakradhar & Ross, 2019).

Lastly, in an internal company email from 2001, the owner of Purdue Pharma wrote “We have to hammer on the abusers in every way possible... They are the culprits and the problem. They are reckless criminals” (Joseph, 2019). This email exemplified another message for the public; “regular people don't abuse OxyContin, only criminals and long-term drug addicts do.”

Using Opinion Leaders

Purdue Pharma created “webs of influence” by building relationships with a variety of stakeholders, including physicians, civil society groups, and research universities (Marks, 2020). These groups are opinion leaders to a majority

of the public and so they helped Purdue to effectively disseminate their message.

One node of the web was the medical community, which was influenced through pharmaceutical representatives and promotional events. Purdue Pharma's representatives distributed informational materials (literature, audiotapes, brochures, and videotapes) and gifts to the physicians. Jonathan Marks (2020) noted that physicians who met with Purdue reps were 10 times more likely to have a patient die of a prescription opioid overdose. Further, between 1996 and 2001, Purdue conducted more than 40 national pain-management conferences attended by medical professionals (Van Zee, 2009). Lastly, on at least one occasion, Purdue hired an opinion leader to speak to hospital staff about addiction (Armstrong, 2019).

The medical research and education field made up the next node. Purdue's infiltration of the field was described in a STAT News article (2019). In 1999, the owners of Purdue helped to start a graduate program at Tufts University in Pain Research, Education, and Policy. As well, Tufts University School of Medicine received millions in funding from the Purdue owners and hired a Purdue staff member as an adjunct associate professor to give lectures about pain and opioid use (Joseph, 2019). In 2002, the company helped to create the Massachusetts General Hospital Purdue Pharma Pain Program.

Another node was civil society groups, such as patient advocacy organizations (PAOs), professional societies, and other health-related NGOs. Purdue funded groups included the Academy of Integrative Pain Management and the American Pain Society. These groups are important because they represent the interests of medical professionals and patients in the policymaking processes. However, no matter how earnest the groups are, donations influence them to act in ways aligned with the interests of the major donors (Marks, 2020).

Influencing the Public through Media

The larger public became exposed to Purdue's message through the media. Purdue funded think tanks used for expert commentary, aided the creation of positive articles, without affiliation disclosure, and deterred or challenged negative coverage of their product or actions (Armstrong, 2019).

David Armstrong's article (2019) details the work of Sally Satel, a psychiatrist who had worked for a Purdue-funded organization. Later, Satel would work directly with Purdue after being recruited by their PR company, Dezenhall Resources. Satel had several pro-opioid articles published in some of the country's biggest news media publications, such as *The New York Times*. In one article, she blamed concerned people for having "opiophobia."

To help increase the exposure to their message, Purdue created a website, "In the Face of Pain," which encouraged patients to "overcome" their "concerns about addiction" (Massachusetts v. Purdue, 2019). Testimonials of alleged personal experiences on the website were written by Purdue consultants (Massachusetts v. Purdue, 2019).

Outcomes

The campaign's success can be measured by the sales of the drug and the market composition following the campaign. Purdue Pharma's sales of OxyContin increased by almost 10 times between 1997 and 2002, and, by 1999, patients with non-cancer-related pain accounted for 86% of the total opioid market (Van Zee, 2009).

Evaluation

Purdue Pharma's campaign helped them achieve their goal of increasing opioid sales, as evidenced by the outcomes. From a PR perspective, the campaign was successful because they set their objective for expanding their market, researched their audiences (high-prescribing doctors, civic groups needing funding, agreeable universities), built relationships with stakeholders, used opinion leaders, and ultimately changed the narrative about their product.

Consequences

In 2007, Purdue Pharma pleaded guilty for “misbranding” OxyContin (Meier, 2018) and, in 2020, made a settlement of \$8.3 billion in a case with the US Department of Justice for their role in the opioid crisis. The company has stopped its practice of promoting sales through sales representatives (Purdue Pharma, n.d.).

Key Learning Points

What PR professionals can learn from this case study is the power of strategically funding and recruiting opinion leaders to spread a message. Critically, Purdue Pharma used a variety of opinion leaders who would be trusted by the government, the medical community, and the general public, which increased the credibility of their message. The audience is naturally skeptical of the message when delivered by an entity that stands to benefit from the audience believing it. However, opinion leaders who are perceived to be impartial are

interpreted as being genuine and trustworthy, thereby making the audience more likely to accept the message.

However, this takeaway needs to be qualified by emphasizing that Purdue's success was largely achieved by deliberately misinforming their audiences and using aggressive and unethical marketing strategies. Purdue succeeded in creating harmful, but lucrative, narratives about opioids and opioid abuse, which have stuck with the public and shaped the opioid crisis for the worse.

While the campaign achieved its goals in the short-term, the ethically problematic behaviour—which should be seen as especially troubling in a field that demands strict adherence to ethical codes—was catastrophic to the company in the long-run.

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Case Study #11: Jack in the Box E. Coli Crisis

On January 15, 1993, the Washington State Health Department alerted Robert Nugent, president of Jack in the Box, that the E. coli outbreak they had been informed of two days earlier, was at least partly attributed to hamburgers purchased at Jack in the Box restaurants (Sellnow and Ulmer, 1995). “Within a month, three children in the Seattle area, all under three, died of E. coli O157:H7 poisoning – the strain linked to Jack in the Box” (p. 138).

One child had eaten at Jack in the Box, it was thought another was infected by a child who became ill after eating at Jack in the Box, and a cause for the third child’s infection was unknown. In total, 400 people were infected with the bacteria in Washington State, Idaho and Nevada. “As a result of this crisis, the Jack in the Box fast-food chain was not only in danger of losing sales, the company’s very existence was threatened by the crisis as well” (p. 138).

Primary Evidence

From the beginning of the crisis, Jack in the Box emphasized they were not solely responsible for the outbreak, pointing to the fact that customers not only ate at Jack in the Box, but other establishments as well. Although not accepting blame for the crisis, Jack in the Box tried to bolster their credibility by announcing in their first press release, January 18, 1993, they had taken measures to ensure all their menu items were prepared in accordance with an advisory issued by the

Washington State Department of Health (Sellnow and Ulmer, 1995).

It wasn't until January 21 that Jack in the Box took some responsibility for the crisis by announcing that the source of the problem was, in fact, contaminated meat. They explained they were reluctant to speculate before results from state tests came back which now indicated the problem was due to contaminated hamburger. Jack in the Box now pointed the finger at their meat supplier.

Robert Nugent also pointed the finger at the Washington Health Department and their apparent lack of passing out information in regards to new regulations, he also addressed corrective action the company was taking. His January 21, 1993 memo announced Jack in the Box would increase cooking times so the internal temperature of all hamburger products would exceed the new state regulations, check all grills to insure proper operating temperatures, and retrain all grill personnel on proper procedures.

Jack in the Box, on January 22, 1993, pledged "to do everything that is morally right for those individuals who had experienced illness after eating at Jack in the Box restaurants as well as their families" (Sellnow and Ulmer, 1995, p. 146). Jack in the Box dropped their criticism of the Washington State Health Department's information distribution procedures February 12, 1993, and further emphasized their explanation of corrective measures (Sellnow and Ulmer, 1995).

Waiting a week to talk with the media is what really hurt the company's reputation. "At the time I thought they were being unfair," says Nugent. "It seemed to me they were more interested in placing blame than in really understanding what happened here" (p. 157). The story was prevalent for weeks, filled with accounts of organ damage and hospitalized kids. Foodmaker did not comment. "We had developed an attitude about PR that was something like, 'Keep our mouth shut and if you want to talk with the press, have them call us,'" recalls

Nugent (p. 157). Faced with negative publicity for a month, Robert Nugent replaced his public relations firm with President Jimmy Carter's former press secretary, Joseph (Jody) Powell, who helped turn things around.

Secondary Evidence

Although officials at Foodmaker Inc., Jack in the Box's parent company, claimed they first learned of the potential contamination on January 17, their initial response to destroy 20,000 pounds of potentially contaminated meat; to switch meat suppliers; to set up a toll-free number for complaints; and to raise cooking temperatures was seen as a positive move. (Soeder, 1993).

Not so positive though was the fact that they didn't publicly accept responsibility for the food poisonings until the crisis was nearly a week old, and they partially blamed suppliers and state health officials. They also sought full recovery of losses and damages from their meat supplier, Vons. In response, the supplier issued this statement: "While we expected Foodmaker to sue its suppliers, we continue to be confident that Vons processing did not contaminate the meat. Health authorities have made it clear that proper cooking would have prevented this tragedy." (Soeder, 1993).

According to Goff, (1999) "Foodmaker did the right things and did them swiftly...But when it came to communicating with the public, Nugent proved amazingly inept" (p. 157). Jack in the Box immediately suspended their hamburger sales, recalled meat from distributors, increased cooking times and temperatures, and pledged to pay all medical costs related to the disaster. Jack in the Box also hired a Dr. David Theno, a prominent food-safety consultant, to design an entirely new food-handling system (Goff, 1999).

Scholarly Journals

Jack in the Box, although still not taking responsibility for the crisis, was able to bolster their public image by emphasizing their willingness to alter the cooking procedures used in their restaurants and insisting their role in the crisis was speculative. (Sellnow and Ulmer, 1995). They emphasized the fact that they were taking actions to improve safeguards, while insisting that the crisis was system-wide rather than specific to their organization. Although they insisted their products were not the source of many infections for which they were suspected, they offered to pay hospital bills of those who had eaten at their restaurants (Sellnow and Ulmer, 1995).

January 21, 1993, marked the day when Jack in the Box took some responsibility for the crisis. In a prepared statement by Robert Nugent, he addressed the contaminated meat and cooking temperatures, but also managed to shift the blame away from Jack in the Box. He explained that their investigation “traced the contaminated hamburger to a single supplier (Sellnow & Ulmer, 1995). “He also explained that the company had taken the ‘extraordinary step’ of replacing all hamburger patties in every restaurant in Washington and Idaho – despite the fact that health officials indicated this step was unnecessary” (p. 143).

Despite the fact Jack in the Box generated the argument of denial, the fact remained that their product had resulted in multiple deaths, and the public was still very skeptical. When Jack in the Box focused on external problems that contributed to the crisis, they tried to de-emphasize internal problems by focusing on the company's history and their compliance with cooking regulations. “In fact, the history of our company's compliance with those regulations is verified through numerous evaluations conducted by federal, state and local governments” (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000, p. 151). In response to Jack in the Box's failure to meet higher temperature guidelines

imposed by the state, Nugent said the message had not reached his office. If Jack in the Box grills had been at the higher state standard, it is unlikely that the crisis would have occurred (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000).

Discussion

The Jack in the Box crisis falls under Coomb's 'accident' category – “unintentional and happen during the course of normal organizational operations” (Coombs, 1995, p. 454). The crisis was devastating to Jack in the Box in the short-term. They had projected losses of between \$20 and \$30 million by March 24, 1993, resulting from the E. coli crisis. However, by the end of the year, they were able to slow their losses substantially.

Jack in the Box used several strategies to weather the E. coli storm. They began with a combination of avoidance and attachment strategies. When they issued their first press release explaining the source of the illness was unclear; and that some, but not all of the people being treated had eaten at their restaurant they employed two types of avoidance strategies – denial of intention and denial of volition. They also used an attachment strategy – bolstering – in the same press release when they announced the extra measures they were taking to ensure all food was cooked in accordance with a new state advisory that was issued.

They also employed scapegoating, a form of denial of volition (avoidance strategy) when they first took some responsibility for the crisis January 21, but blamed their meat supplier for the contaminated meat. They also used forgiveness strategies, more specifically remediation, when they announced they would pay all the medical bills for people who became ill during the E. coli crisis. Another forgiveness strategy, rectification, was used when Jack in the Box announced

several corrective actions they were taking in regards to cooking temperatures.

Although Foodmaker, Jack in the Box's parent company, continued to be in the news for years following the crisis – every time E. coli came up the whole Jack in the Box story would resurface – the company survived. By referring reporters to articles regarding Foodmaker's food-safety innovations, the company regained credibility. In 1994, they instituted the fast-food industry's first comprehensive food-safety program, the Hazard Analysis & Critical Control Points system. Today, they are considered the leader in food safety in the fast-food industry (Liddle, 1997) and they are the country's fifth-largest burger chain (Goff, 1999).

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Case Study #12: NASA Challenger Disaster

On the evening of January 27, 1986 the temperature in Merritt Island, Florida dropped below freezing. On the island at Kennedy Space Center, the freeze was causing a dilemma for members of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and executives at the Morton Thiokol Corporation. The Morton Thiokol Corporation produces the solid rocket boosters for the space shuttle program and the discussion that night was about the cold weather. Space Shuttle Mission STS-51L, Challenger, was scheduled for launch in the morning and there were questions about the effect the cold would have on Challengers booster seals. Because there hadn't been any specific testing at the current temperature, NASA officials decided there wasn't enough data to support cancellation of the launch. A special passenger was scheduled to be aboard mission STS-51L.

Schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe was scheduled to be America's first private citizen in space (NASA, 1986). Challenger launched on time as schoolchildren around the country watched, and 75 seconds into the flight tragedy struck. Eleven miles above the earth fire leaked from one of the booster seals and Challenger erupted into flames. NASA experienced its first major crisis 19 years and one day after the explosion on the launch pad of the Apollo Program, January 27, 1967.

Primary Evidence

The January 1986 press kit for the Space Shuttle Mission STS-51K contained a general release, general information about

the mission,, and background releases on each mission, the shuttle and its crew. The press kit also included schedules for major activities, diagrams explaining the systems and how they will be launched from Challenger. In addition to filming lessons, McAuliffe was scheduled to broadcast two live lessons on day six. The kit explained the U.S. Liberty Coins. The Liberty coins were to become legal tender and would be taken into orbit on mission 51-L. As it turned out, President Ronald Reagan chose those same words during his tribute to the gallant Challenger crew.

The president said, "It's all part of the process of exploration and discovery. The future doesn't belong to the fainthearted; it belongs to the brave." President Reagan went on to say, "the shuttle flights will continue and more volunteers, civilians and even more school teachers will travel into space" (Reagan, 1986). On March 6, Lawrence Mulloy, manager of the NASA booster rocket program said, "full-scale test firing was never part of NASA's plan, because they would have cost too much" (Knight-Ridder Newspapers, 1986, p.1). The temperature limits for the O-ring seals is 25 degrees.

The estimated temperature at launch, he said, was 27 degrees. In a story published June 12, 1986, Mulloy said that if he and his colleagues had properly analyzed available data before the launch, they probably would have realized that cold weather would cause the joint to fail. He also admitted that looking back there was a point in which "we took a step too far" (Fishmen, 1986). The Presidential Commission later implied that Mulloy lied in his testimony to the commission. They say that contrary to his testimony, the seriousness of concern about the weather was not communicated. Mulloy's quotes in the media and accusations by the Presidential Commission begin to erode NASA's credibility. The general public began to lose confidence in NASA's top executives.

Secondary Evidence

All three of the major networks stopped carrying live coverage of shuttle launches years prior to Challenger. The only live coverage of the launch was carried on CNN. The Houston Chronicle published a blow by blow article describing how the event was covered by the media. Three networks interrupted programs, (Hodges, 1986). The chronicle describes how quickly the three major networks were able to respond to the crisis. CBS's Dan Rather had arrived for work early that day. After being notified of the tragedy, Rather rushed to one of CBS's flash studios. CBS was on the air with Rather's report within six minutes after the explosion. During the report, Rather almost lost his composure as he listed the names of the crew then said, "lest we forget what brave people these are. Those who dare to take wings and touch the face of God," (Hodges, 1986, p. 26).

NBC's Today show carried the launch on the West Coast edition, since it was still on during that time frame. As soon as NBC's New York office realized what happened it threw it on the air. NBC caught reporter Jay Barbee saying "it's falling to pieces," (Hodges, 1986, p.26). Shortly after the accident, White House spokesman Larry Speaks held a press conference. People from the Pentagon and Congress and even former astronauts were being quoted on TV stations across the country.

The only ones not being quoted were NASA officials. Soon after the accident there were over 400 reporters at the Kennedy Space Center (Hodges, 1986). The Houston Chronicle ran quotes from the final transmission from Challenger. NASA informed Challenger "You're go for throttle up," and Commander Francis R. Scobee replied, "Roger, go at throttle up" (Byars, 1986, p.1). Steve Nesbitt, of the public affairs office at Johnson Space Center, said, "We have no downlink. Flight controllers are looking very carefully at the situation. Obviously we have a major malfunction," (Byrar, 1986, p.1). After that,

media questions were referred to NASA Headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Scholarly Journals

On October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union began the space race with the launch of Sputnik. By July of 1958 the United States had responded with the Space Act, which created the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). In 1983 Russian testing of the shuttle Buran pressured NASA to speed up the development of the U.S. shuttle program. The Russian space program was also very close to launching the Mir Space Station. In 1982 Reagan pressured the space program by announcing that “the first priority of the United States Space Transportation System (STS) is to make the space launch system fully operational and cost-effective in providing routine access to space,” (Washington: The Commission, 1986, p. 164).

Discussion

Challenger falls into two categories on the Crisis Type Matrix (Coombs, 1995). As a human-induced error, the normal operations and product defects would put it in the Accident categories. Because members of NASA knew of the risk and chose to launch anyway, the explosion could also be categorized as a transgression. As an attachment strategy, (Coombs, 1995) says an organization uses transcendence when it defines the crisis in a larger goal that the public accepts. The example of this would be both the media and president referring to the astronauts as “brave pioneers of the future.”

By using future, he discounts any speculation that the space program may be in jeopardy. Instead Reagan likens their

dedication to that of the great explorer Sir Francis Drake, who died aboard a ship off the coast of Panama. The president also encouraged parents to sit down and talk to their children about the disaster. He told parents to explain that these men and women had a hunger to explore the universe for the betterment of mankind. They were given a challenge and they met it with joy. Although sad, they died serving us, serving their country (Reagan, 1986).

NASA took several big hits to their credibility. The initial handling of information to the media created suspicion and distrust. Stories about transporting astronauts' bodies on Navy trucks in bags began to arise. With a lack of information the media was forced to get its information from less reliable sources. Contradictory statements along with the Presidential Commission implying that Mulloy was less than truthful further eroded NASA's credibility in the eyes of the American public.

A month after the Challenger exploded, the Los Angeles Times published a survey about Americans confidence in the space program. The survey found that although most Americans remained supportive of the space program they had lost trust in NASA. Most of those surveyed cited NASA's decision to launch as the primary reason for the loss of confidence (Redburn, 1986). It took years for NASA to regain its credibility.

A decade after the disaster many media outlets looked back at the tragedy. Most agree that it is now viewed as a turning point for NASA. Using repentance as a forgiveness strategy, NASA ordered safety changes from stem to stern on the space shuttle fleet. The O-ring seals were redesigned. Engineers fashioned a rudimentary escape system that would allow the crew to bail out if the plane was heading for an impact over the ocean. The safety team of managers was expanded to include independent safety experts, private contractors, and mission managers to supervise the countdowns. For the space program itself, most agree the ordeal brought positive

changes, including an improved safety record and restoration of public confidence (Sallee, 1986).

Prior to the disaster some might argue that NASA's press kit included too much information. The press kit was very thorough and was over 30 pages long. These kits provided the media with critical background information for putting together initial releases. Dan Rather went on air at 10:45 a.m. and didn't sign off until 4:13 p.m. With the lack of information from NASA, reporters were forced to look for information elsewhere. Video of Christa McAuliffe's family and friends at Cape Canaveral going from expressions of joy to disbelief and horror filled the airwaves (Hodges, 1986). Film of children of Christa McAuliffe's Concord school was also aired throughout the afternoon. NASA had no choice but to rebuild their organization after its mistakes were published in the Presidential Commission report (Washington: The Commission, 1986, p. 164).

As supported by the survey published in the Los Angeles Times, framing the astronauts as pioneers and hero's by the president and media saved public confidence in the space program. The program survived the public distrust in the organization itself. With the Russian space program running at full speed, American's realized they couldn't afford to abandon their space program. For NASA to gain forgiveness from the public they had to rectify the problems with the shuttle program and their own decision-making process. Their addressing of every issue in the commission's report showed their acknowledgement that the system was broke.

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Case Study #13: Nespresso Coffee Pods and Corporate Greenwashing

by April Jordan, 2018

Nespresso is a company that has made disposable aluminum coffee pods since 1986 and operates in over 60 countries (Nespresso, n.d.). Nespresso's product allows consumers to easily make espresso using specialty coffee makers and single-use coffee pods (n.d.). Through various methods and with varying degrees of success, Nespresso attempts to brand itself as an environmentally-conscious company. Since 2015, the company has been pushing to implement convenient worldwide recycling programs and convince the public to feel good about using the recyclable pods (n.d.).

Nespresso published videos on YouTube and TV about their recycling program that were aimed towards English-speaking Western countries, such as Australia and the United States. They powered up their combined marketing and public relations efforts to amplify this pro-recycling message. YouTube videos and TV ads seem to be the primary delivery method for these public relations and marketing campaigns. Their video titled Nespresso Capsule Recycling Program USA (Nespresso, 2015) best encapsulates the company's PR efforts regarding recycling the pods because. Interestingly, the PR campaign has no flashy hashtag or slogan attached to it and is not glamorous in any way, while the related marketing campaign has those features.

Nespresso's recycling PR videos are generally unstylish. In the previously mentioned video, the founder and president of one pod recycling plant appears on screen to narrate part of the video, but does not appear to be a polished speaker. In contrast, Nespresso's high-glamour marketing campaigns about recycling involve celebrity George Clooney. The two different approaches are noteworthy, insofar as the marketing approach would doubtlessly have a higher reach and impact, while the PR videos may well be more for to establish their bona fide intentions and for inoculation against allegations of environmental wrongdoing than for actual distribution.

Involving George Clooney, a known humanitarian (Inside Philanthropy, 2017), in Nespresso's recent marketing over the last year is calculated and, one must assume, meant to springboard off the earlier public relations efforts. The combination of the un-glamorous recycling plants, followed by later marketing videos of Clooney suggests Nespresso first wanted to convince high-information stakeholders that Nespresso is truly committed to making a difference. They then drive home the pretty, feel-good idea of being part of saving the planet through recycling, just like good-guy George Clooney. That latter campaign would be aimed at low-information consumers and designed to also amplify the previous message to high-information stakeholders.

Unfortunately for Nespresso, there were many challenges working against the PR campaign. Mainly, people already thought coffee pods were bad for the environment (BBC News, 2016) and Nespresso is owned by Nestle, a company whose reputation has been attacked for disregarding human rights (McGraw, 2017).

Perhaps the only factor working in Nespresso's favour for this recycling campaign was that other major coffee pod brands are much more difficult to recycle (Gunther, 2015). Consumers must do much of the work to recycle plastic pods, whereas Nespresso only asks their consumers to return the pods to a

drop-off point or fill a special bag with the pods, then put them in the regular recycling bin (Recycling Process, n.d.). This is a major benefit for consumers and looks like a genuine effort by Nespresso to reduce the environmental impact of their pods.

The resounding consensus in online comments sections and articles is that, while Nespresso pods are not good for the environment, at least they are easy to recycle and are not as bad as the plastic pods, which are sent straight to landfills. However, news outlets and environmentally-focused blogs have generally given balanced pro/con articles for Nespresso's pods, sometimes even leaning towards positive attitudes, with coverage such as "Nespresso Bid to Recycle Coffee Pods" (Smithers, 2017).

Comments on the Nespresso recycling videos are generally positive; some commenters even claim they switched to Nespresso because of their recycling programs. Other Nespresso campaigns do not always receive such accolades, as evidenced by comments on "The Choices We Make" (2017).

After examining Nespresso's campaign to improve public opinion around the environmental impacts of their pods, there are a few main takeaways for public relations practitioners. First, Nespresso effectively used visuals to create emotion for the audience. A company must do more than say they are committed to a cause. They must show this to the audience and make them feel that this is true. This could mean depicting a scene that is less visually appealing than what the company usually shows if it creates an honest feeling.

Second, PR and marketing efforts are often laddered and intertwined in the effort to steer public opinion. While different and distinct, the two can be very successfully scaffolded.

Lastly, to shift an opinion, a brand must make a genuine effort towards the cause in question and must convey the message in a way the audience is willing to accept (lest the company be skewered in the media). The Nespresso PR campaign was successful because Nespresso simultaneously

made a worldwide effort to be the most conveniently recyclable coffee pod company and launched an authentic-looking two-part campaign at the same time. In the minds of some consumers, the Nespresso coffee pods are an environmentally-friendly product, which is the desired outcome for any greenwashing campaign.

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Case Study #14: Bernie Sanders' Media Blackout

By Melissa White and Erin Relland, 2017

Background

Leading up to the 2016 US presidential election, Hillary Clinton seemed to be the prohibitive favourite for the Democratic nomination, but a charismatic semi-independent senator from Vermont was creating an impressive challenge to Clinton's presumed coronation: Bernie Sanders. Where Clinton was conservative and played a frontrunner's campaign strategy, Sanders was unconventional and radical (by American standards). The result was a legitimate two-way race for the Democratic nomination.

Meanwhile, a heavily crowded Republican field with no clear frontrunner was being disrupted (if not dominated) by a man who had never held political office: business mogul Donald Trump. His campaign was also unconventional, perhaps most noted for its irreverent tone and borderline fascist policy proposals.

The Trump and Sanders campaigns disrupted a long-standing conservatism about how to approach presidential elections.

Unequal Media Treatment

On August 15, 2015, Bernie Sanders' Los Angeles rally attracted 27,500 supporters, but only the Washington Post, The Hill, and NBC Los Angeles covered it (O'Keefe & Wagner, 2015; Easley, 2015; Zhang and Har, 2015). Hillary Clinton's largest crowd at that point had been 5,500 people (O'Keefe & Wagner, 2015).

On March 15, 2016, Sanders spoke to an enthusiastic crowd of thousands in Arizona for nearly an hour, but Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC did not carry the speech because they were "standing by for Trump" (Blow, 2016, para. 1-3).

Why was there a lack of network news coverage of Sanders' rallies? While the size of his rallies made him worth covering, Bernie Sanders' campaign received significantly less coverage than Hillary Clinton's and Donald Trump's for two main reasons: Trump's popularity and ability to earn media and Sanders' unwillingness to engage in the media's "contest of personalities" (Tyndall, 2017, para. 2).

First, let's look at the numbers. Figure 1 shows a comparison between the news coverage received by the top three candidates on ABC, CBS, and NBC during the 2016 presidential election compared to the coverage received by the top three candidates in the last non-incumbent race in 2008.

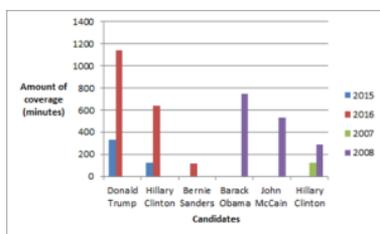


Figure 1: Comparison of candidates' media coverage on ABC, CBS, and NBC in the 2016 and 2008 elections (Tyndall, 2016; Tyndall, 2008)

This data shows that not only did the 2016 presidential election receive more ABC, CBS, and NBC coverage than the 2008 election, but Trump and Clinton received a much larger portion of the coverage than Sanders. The 2008 data also shows that this particular media bias is not the norm: Clinton not

only received more coverage in 2008 than Sanders did in 2016,

but she received a larger percentage of the coverage in 2008 (Tyndall, 2016; Tyndall, 2008).

This disparity in coverage extends to newsstands: Margaret Sullivan, editor of the New York Times, conceded that, in August, 2015, the Times ran 63 articles on Trump, 54 on Clinton, and only 14 articles on Sanders (2015). In this respect, however, Sanders' Times coverage was similar to that received by non-Trump Republican nominees (Sullivan, 2015).

Media Disparity Explained

One reason for the disparity between the three candidates is Trump's ability to earn media: as of March, 2016, mediaQuant reported that Trump had spent only \$10 million on ads, but earned almost \$2 billion in media (Confessore & Yourish, 2016). Compare that to the \$746 million Clinton earned and the \$28 million Sanders earned (Confessore & Yourish, 2016). Since Trump initially was not leading in the polls or raising much money, two indicators to journalists that a candidate is worth covering, he attracted journalists by being unconventional, sensational, and "the type of story material that will catch and hold an audience's attention" (Patterson, 2016, para. 16).

Because of Trump's popularity, the Democratic primary received less than half as much news coverage as the Republican primary (Patterson, 2016). Clinton also went into the election with a media following: the New York Times, for example, had a reporter covering her full-time starting in 2013 (Sullivan, 2015). Networks also initially believed that Clinton would be more successful (Democracy Now, 2016). This environment made gaining name recognition very difficult for Sanders. For a candidate with "no money, no organization, and no national following," Sanders needed his name to circulate so that voters would know who he was. He would need to rise in

the polls for the media would see him as a candidate worthy of coverage (Patterson, 2016, para. 37; Lauter, 2016).

Furthermore, in the 2016 presidential election, name recognition seemed to be more important than whether the coverage was positive or negative. As Figure 2 shows, Sanders received the most positive issue coverage of the top four candidates (Media Tenor, 2016). The tone of his coverage was also much more positive than the tone of Clinton’s coverage (Patterson, 2016). But the small amount of positive coverage he received did not make up for the fact that his name recognition was low. Name recognition influences campaigns: with a lack of media coverage, a candidate’s name will circulate less and voters will be less likely to choose the candidate (Lauter, 2016).

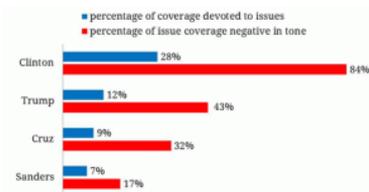


Figure 2: “Volume and tone of top candidates’ issue coverage” (Media Tenor, 2015)

Another reason for Sanders’ lack of media coverage was his determination to prevent personality from overshadowing the issues his campaign was addressing. The 2016 election coverage was definitely a “contest of

personalities rather than of public policy issues” and Sanders refused to play into this personality rivalry (Tyndall, 2017, para. 2; Grim, 2016). Sanders’ supporters also felt that the media was relying too much on “fluff” and not enough on the important issues (Sullivan, 2015, para. 10). For example, they criticized a Times Magazine interview where Bernie was asked what he thought about Hillary’s hair (a question he refused to answer) and a New York Times headline where he was called a “grumpy old socialist” (Sullivan, 2015, para. 16).

While Sanders’ focus on the issues was admirable, issues made up a very small part of the media’s focus in 2016 (Media Tenor, 2015). As Figure 2 shows, only 28% of Clinton’s coverage, 12% of Trump’s coverage, and 7% of Sanders’ coverage was

focused on issues (Media Tenor, 2015). To focus so much attention on such a small area of interest for the media definitely affected Sanders' coverage.

Though Sanders did not get as much network media coverage as Clinton, his campaign's social media presence was better than Clinton's. Sanders' #feelthebern hashtag received "an average of more than 2,000 retweets per hour," while Clinton's #imwithher hashtag received only 425 retweets per hour (Holmes, 2016, para. 6). Sanders' social media also outpaced Clinton's in impact, engagement and authenticity (Holmes, 2016). This success is not a surprise, considering that Sanders' younger supporters were more likely to show up at rallies and get their election news from social media (Blow, 2016). Since Clinton tended to attract older supporters who were more likely to get their news from networks, the major networks' media bias could also be the result of Sanders' campaign not appealing to an older demographic (Blow, 2016).

Lessons Learned

The Bernie Sanders media blackout provides valuable insights about engaging with the media during a campaign. Personality tends to earn more media in an election than issues do. Sanders' decision to not engage in the media's personality rivalry, while admirable, made him less attractive in a media environment where a very small proportion of campaign coverage was given to issues. In that way, Sanders' experience with the media also illustrates the importance of understanding the media environment your campaign is working in. Large rallies did not earn media coverage for Sanders, but could they earn coverage for a candidate in another situation? Or, are there other types of stories that seem to be attracting the media? Lastly, Sanders' campaign shows that name recognition should be a central part of the media

strategy for candidates, especially for newer candidates or those running for the first time.

As a final lesson, people engaged in campaigns may need to consider whether certain principled approaches to the campaign may be less sacred than believed to be. In the case of the Sanders campaign, could they have set aside their disdain about personality-based politics to break through? If the mainstream media has a defined format for covering issues and campaigns, earning that attention may require working in that defined format—for better or worse.

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Case Study #15: “Hello Hong Kong” Needs a Reintroduction

By Candice Fok and Ravel Chan, 2023

Background

Hong Kong, as an international tourist city, has long relied on its thriving tourism industry. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of incoming travellers to Hong Kong dramatically plummeted, dropping from 55.91 million in 2019 to 3.57 million in 2020. In 2021, the number even further decreased to only 91,398 visitors (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2023). The contribution of the tourism industry to Hong Kong’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) plunged from 3.6 per cent in 2019 to 0.4 per cent in 2020 (Census and Statistics Department, 2021).

With the easing of the COVID-19 situation and the reopening of borders, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government, in collaboration with the Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB), organized a large-scale promotional campaign named as “Hello Hong Kong.” The campaign aimed to entice business and leisure travellers to return to Hong Kong by publicizing various measures and activities.

The campaign was officially announced on February 2, 2023, and implemented in various aspects, starting from March 1, 2023.

Goals and Key Message

The “Hello Hong Kong” campaign was launched to revive Hong Kong’s tourism industry and reaffirm Hong Kong’s status as an iconic tourist destination after the pandemic. The campaign aimed to rebuild travellers’ confidence and attract visitors by showcasing the city’s unique attractions, cultural experiences, and renowned hospitality. The key message of the campaign is “Come and visit Hong Kong. We are as vibrant as we used to be”; unfortunately, the tagline doesn’t truly capture that message.

Key Actors and Key Actions Taken

The government has shown great dedication to the “Hello Hong Kong” campaign. John Lee, the Chief Executive of HKSAR, was featured in the promotional video. The campaign cost the government approximately \$100 million HKD (\$17 million CAD) in its first phase (Hung, 2023).

The campaign included three key events (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2023).

World of Winners 500,000 Flight Tickets Offers

In order to entice international travellers to come to Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Tourism Board partnered with Cathay Pacific Airways, Hong Kong Express, Hong Kong Airlines, and Greater Bay Airlines to offer 500,000 free, economy, return air tickets to Hong Kong from countries in Asia, Europe, North America, and Oceania (The Standard, 2023).

The tickets were distributed through the airlines’ websites on

a first-come, first-served basis. Winners will only need to pay for the taxes and surcharges of the ticket. “A round trip ticket between Vancouver and Hong Kong only costs me \$434 CAD,” tweeted a social media-using Vancouverite (Docto, 2023), while typically, economy, roundtrip tickets from YVR to Hong Kong cost in the \$4,700 CAD to \$5,400 range (Shepert, 2023).

HK Goodies Visitor Consumption Voucher

HK Goodies is a consumption voucher program for foreign travellers. By signing up with a non-Hong Kong phone number, travellers were eligible for a traveller-exclusive offer worth \$100 HKD (\$17 CAD) or above.

Travellers can choose to enjoy a complimentary welcome drink from the participating bars or restaurants, get a cash voucher to enjoy \$100 HKD off at selected merchants with no minimum spending required, or choose from other options, such as free transportation tickets or redeem special gifts at attractions as memorabilia of the visit.

New and Upgraded Attractions

During the COVID-19 lockdown, the Hong Kong government took the opportunity to upgrade existing attractions and build new tourist spots in preparation for the reopening of the border.

New must-see destinations include M+ Museum, Hong Kong Palace Museum, the new sixth-generation Peak Tram, Water World Ocean Park, and the new night-time show in Hong Kong Disneyland. All these new developments and enhanced landmarks aimed to captivate and engage tourists, making

Hong Kong still one of the most sought-after destination for world travellers.

Outcome

The “Hello Hong Kong” campaign has yielded remarkable results in revitalizing tourism in the city after the pandemic. Since its launch, there has been a significant influx of tourists returning to Hong Kong. Recent data from the Hong Kong Tourism Board reveals a staggering increase in visitor arrivals, with roughly 10 million visitor arrivals in the first five months of 2023 (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2023). In May of 2023 alone, the total number of visitor arrivals exceeded 2.82 million, which accounted for approximately 55 per cent of the pre-pandemic level, indicating a promising rebound in the industry (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2023).

The success of “Hello Hong Kong” has garnered extensive coverage and international headlines. The campaign’s innovative approach and large-scale marketing events have captured the imagination of both local and international media outlets, further enhancing Hong Kong’s visibility as a premier travel destination. Despite its achievements, however, the campaign has been criticized for failing to establish an emotional connection with the authentic essence of Hong Kong.

Learning for PR practitioners

The government of HKSAR has regarded this post-pandemic tourism campaign a success because of the dramatic increase of the number of incoming international tourists. Meanwhile,

the “Hello Hong Kong” campaign provides valuable lessons for PR specialists:

Encapsulate the Key Message into a Snappy, Effective Tagline

While the tagline “Hello Hong Kong” is short and catchy, it fails to promote the uniqueness of Hong Kong beyond a general warm welcome. This tagline is “frothy, vapid and meaningless” (Sudhaman, 2023).

When New York said “I Love NY,” it was about pride. “Hello Hong Kong” has no concrete meaning and will get ignored (Superbrands News, 2023). The key message of the whole campaign is “Come and visit Hong Kong. We are as vibrant as we used to be.” However, the key message is not effectively encapsulated in the encoded message, “Hello Hong Kong.” It fails to communicate the irresistible features of the “real” Hong Kong, such as the eclectic atmosphere in older districts, the well-preserved natural environment, and the underestimated waterfront running trails. They are the reasons for tourists’ next visits.

Considering the slogan used by the government’s BrandHK campaign in 2001: “Hong Kong — Asia’s World City,” the use of a supposed contradiction in terms made it very concise and clear to the world that Hong Kong is a top international city in Asia. “Hello Hong Kong” appears to be rather colourless.

Avoid a One-off, Expensive Promotional Event and Conduct a Thorough Audience Analysis

A successful promotional campaign aims to persuade the

target audience to change their behaviour in a sustainable way. In this campaign, the primary goal is to attract the international tourists to visit Hong Kong frequently.

While the giveaway of 500,000 free flight tickets is a dashing gimmick and drove global headlines, it was a costly, one-off event with very limited reach and only a short-term impact. Charles Lankester, the Executive Vice President of Global Reputation Management in Ruder Finn, likened this free ticket giveaway to a “superficial, promotional sugar rush” (Sudhaman, 2023). Take Hello Hong Kong’s Canadian campaign as an example; “there are only 1,555 tickets up for grabs” (Dunn, 2023). While the giveaway may drive a considerable number of travellers to flock to Hong Kong in the short run, it is unlikely that this campaign can sustain their interest beyond the initial promotion and have them come back as frequent visitors in the long run. In other words, the cost-effectiveness of the event is low because the promotion effect diminishes very quickly.

When planning a tourism campaign, organizations must consider their return on investment. According to the statistics on incoming visitor by country, Canada was never one of the top 10 sources of visitors into Hong Kong between 2017 and 2019 (Hong Kong Immigration, 2019). Therefore, conducting a thorough audience analysis would have helped identify the target market and allocate resources more effectively to boost the number of visitors coming from the top 10 countries, including Mainland China, Taiwan, South Korea, and the U.S.

Test Operating Capacity Before Launching

Given that the free flight giveaway is the most dazzling event of the campaign, the first point of contact, the airline website, must be fully functional in order to leave the best first impression for all the international travellers.

Unfortunately, what most Canadians and the rest of North

America got was not the free tickets, but a complete disaster (Docto, 2023). A participant tweeted, “@Cathaypacific Your execution of the rediscover HK promotion for tickets from the USA to HKG was disastrous. [...] I got nothing but error messages, denied access” (Alberts, 2023). Lots of other participants expressed their anger and frustration about the system failure, hours-long wait times and the unfairness.

Undoubtedly, the campaign of free flights giveaways has attracted worldwide attention. However, the ticket selling system failed to live up to the tourists' expectation. Therefore, comments like “don't run a campaign if your IT isn't ready” (Wong, 2023) were everywhere on X (formerly Twitter) and it may create a self-inflicted public relation headache.

To leave a positive first impression, PR campaigns must thoroughly test and prepare all systems before launching such a large-scale, massive worldwide campaign.

Conclusion

The “Hello Hong Kong” campaign showed promising results in revitalizing tourism in Hong Kong, but there are valuable lessons to be learned for tourism boards to enhance campaign effectiveness. To further ensure a favourable return on investment, whether the number of global travellers in the next five years can be comparable with trends before a critical incident (COVID-19, in this case) will be of paramount importance.

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