

OH, THAT WOULD NEVER HAPPEN!

WHY YOU NEED CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

Well, today is your lucky day! You get three mini-columns for the price of one!

Just about every day we see in the news an example of a company or individual who should have had a crisis communication plan, and paid dearly in the court of public opinion because they did not. For example, United Airlines vs. American Airlines, Kathy Griffin and Jerry Remy.

United Airlines

Most all of us remember well that video from earlier this year of a doctor being physically removed from a United Airlines plane prior to takeoff because it had been overbooked by the airline. This was not a pleasant sight and the paying passenger ended up in the hospital for several days with multiple injuries.

To his credit, the CEO of United, Oscar Munoz, addressed the issue early on. To his detriment, he handled it very poorly. His first statement apologized for having to “re-accommodate” passengers. Re-accommodate? How about physically assaulting? Then it came to light that the passenger was 69 years old and a physician. So, Mr. Munoz came out again the next day, with another apology. However, in this statement, he also accused the passenger involved of being “disruptive and belligerent”.

TIP #1: In a crisis, don't blame the victim. And don't try to blame someone else for something that is your fault. Admit your error quickly, announce how you plan to rectify the situation and move on.

Ultimately United got their messaging right, but it took several days, and by then, social media had had a field day vilifying the airline, to the point it caused a (temporary) drop in stock prices.

American Airlines

By contrast, American Airlines had an on-board issue just days later involving a flight attendant and two passengers. The flight attendant allegedly forcibly removed a baby stroller from the hands of a passenger narrowly missing the passenger's baby. When another passenger intervened on behalf of the upset mom, the flight attendant became even more agitated. Of course, several passengers had video of the confrontation and posted these almost immediately. And, of course, the videos went viral, especially in light of the recent United Airlines fiasco.

What did American Airlines do? They followed Tip #1 above. They immediately issued a statement stating that the incident does not “reflect our values or how we care for our customers.” They issued a sincere apology, stated that they were making sure all of the passenger's “family's needs are being met while she is in our care,” and announced the suspension of the flight attendant.

So, what's the bottom line? Although United's stock and passenger travel have rebounded, people still remember the ugly incident, and the several failed attempts at a sincere sounding apology. As for American, most may remember there was some type of incident, but because of proper crisis communications, damage to the brand's reputation has been minimal.

Kathy Griffin

Kathy Griffin is a comedian. She has had success pushing limits. Earlier this year, by her own admission, she went too far. No need to get in to a lot of graphic detail, but suffice it to say that Griffin posed holding a grotesque mannequin head depicting President Trump. For some reason, she thought this would be funny. Not surprisingly, backlash was immediate. Condemnation was swift and universal. Griffin lost several professional bookings. She issued a brief apology the next day admitting she had gone “too far”.

But then, she did something else. She held a news conference with an attorney by her side. Yes, she again apologized, but went on to blame sexism (this wouldn't have happened if it was a male comedian,) the President's family and even the President himself for trying to “ruin” her. She even became defiant saying that President Trump was messing with the “wrong redhead.”

Uh, note to Kathy Griffin, you brought this on yourself by posting the photo in the first place!

TIP #2: When involved in a crisis, and you are responsible for it, becoming defiant and combative does not help your public image. Ever.

Jerry Remy

OK, raise your hands if you know who Jerry Remy is. Just as I thought....not many hands. For nearly 30 years, Remy, a former major league ballplayer, has been the color commentator on Boston Red Sox broadcasts. Earlier this season, the Sox were facing a pitcher who is from Japan. When the other team's pitching coach visited the mound to chat with the pitcher, he brought an interpreter with him.

During this visit, Remy expressed his view that this should not be allowed because it gives the player an extra advantage. He said that players should “learn baseball language.” Immediately it kicked up a dust storm on social media. Some agreed with his comments. Some called them hateful. Some just said that Remy was “out of touch.”

Was Remy purposely being controversial or purposely demeaning a player from another culture? Highly unlikely. Is there a reason that broadcasters should have a crisis communications plan? Maybe not, but then again, maybe they should! This example just shows that if you are a person, or company, or organization in the public eye, you are intensely scrutinized for everything that you say or do. And it doesn't take much these days for some individual or entity to be offended. And when offense is taken, the first stop is usually social media.

So, are you ready to put that crisis communications plan together yet?

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