

Choosing the Outgoing Message: What We Should Have Already Learned From Nixon

By Tracy Williams

Tiger Woods broke the cardinal rule of crisis communications—report your own bad news. Others will be more than happy to do so for you, often get it wrong, keep it going longer and provide no glimpse of the true emotions of the transgressor. If Tiger had told everything, as painful as that would have been, it would have cut the legs off the follow-up stories.

He should have learned from Richard Nixon, who proved forever that “stonewalling”—his own word—failed even the all-powerful president of the United States. Bill Clinton, a Rhodes scholar, didn’t learn either, nor did many otherwise extremely successful public figures. Gary Hart. John Edwards. Eliot Spitzer. Kobe Bryant. Mark Sanford. Each and every one followed up their indiscretion by fumbling their crisis communications. It’s human instinct to want to deny and cover up, to use wish power that the story will fade from headlines. The most difficult persuasion a crisis manager must make is to get the client to face the reality immediately before the story hits page one.

If Nixon had come clean the very day the “plumbers” were arraigned, would Watergate have ever been as big? Would Woodward and Bernstein and the *Washington Post* have become, well, them? I don’t think so. David Letterman learned. He shocked everyone when he reported that he’d had affairs with staffers before there was a story. What did Letterman accomplish that Woods and the rest did not? He didn’t make the problem go away. Real problems never go away.

The same rules apply for businesses. It is critical to be up front and comprehensive with all crisis communications, whether you’re about to

announce a merger, acquisitions, layoffs, lawsuits, product recalls or worse. Advance planning will significantly diminish the perception by the media and other important audiences of cover up and confusion. It’s a reassuring task to



The only achievable goal of crisis management is to reduce the duration and intensity of the pain.

envision unthinkable scenerios and to organize thinking about how best to respond. The checklist below can help guide communications planning for any number of crisis scenarios:

- ▶ Once again, be the first to break your own bad news. Even if the solution is elusive, begin with full disclosure.
- ▶ Confirm facts, so you can communicate openly and honestly and accurately articulate the situation. Your communications counsel must be fully aware of all the facts.
- ▶ Identify all key audiences and develop a strategy for each.
- ▶ Develop concise, factual messages that can be understood quickly by all—internal/employees, media, investors, vendors and outside advisers (accountants, lawyers, public relations and advertising agencies)—to be repeated throughout the company verbally and in all written materials by leadership and crisis team.
- ▶ Be honest and thorough with everyone.
- ▶ Craft more detailed Q&As, customer letters, vendor letters, etc., that provide facts and reassurance they need. Don’t neglect your own employees.

- ▶ Protect your people by empowering them with knowledge. They are an exceptionally viral group of communicators.
- ▶ If there is a solution to the problem, work toward solving it quickly as openly as possible. Quite often, the best you can hope for is to mitigate the immediate damage of the crisis by being open. If you hide something, not only will it be discovered, it will destroy credibility and reputations.
- ▶ Use all of the tools at your disposal, including your corporate Web site, internal sites, public relations wire services and social media.
- ▶ Continue to communicate with all key audiences until the crisis has passed. Consistency is important.
- ▶ Learn from the experience and anticipate the next crisis. Plan for likely and even unlikely scenarios. Know the steps you're going to take before you have to take them.

- ▶ Of course, there are limits to what crisis communications can do. The greatest lesson from the BP oil spill may be to plan for all potential disasters and pair them with real-world solutions. If you've identified a risk but don't know how to fix the problem quickly if something goes wrong, maybe you should back off and figure that out first.

The rules of managing a crisis are unequivocal—in matters of fact, there is no choice. The die is cast. The only achievable goal of crisis management is to reduce the duration and intensity of the pain. Then, set on a course of rebuilding your reputations. Look at Nixon—by the end of his life, he was considered a statesman. Tiger is at least playing golf again. **PRN**

Tracy Olmstead Williams, president and CEO of Olmstead Williams Communications, works with technology, healthcare and cleantech companies, as well as law firms and other professional service firms.