

Navigating Through Crisis

Part 2: Accept Responsibility

by Ann Taylor

In this second part of a five-part series on crisis management, Ann Taylor, recipient of the Public Relations Society of America's Gold Excalibur Award for Crisis Management, examines successfully navigating through a crisis with responsibility acceptance.

PLAN NOW FOR THE INEVITABLE

As discussed in part one of this five-part series, an unplanned event that radically raises scrutiny and threatens organizational reputation — a crisis — will follow a pattern. Every crisis flows through these phases: from pre-crisis, to acute, to resolution and recovery. The best time for any organization to prepare for the unforeseen, even the unimaginable, is now.

These are five steps to navigate through a crisis:

1. Protect trust
2. Accept responsibility
3. Repair damage
4. Learn lessons
5. Bounce forward (not back)

Each step deserves to be examined, understood, and incorporated into an organization's crisis strategy. However, without step one, none of the others will succeed.

Step 2: Accept Responsibility

Often, attorneys advise clients to shut down all external communication when they manage an acute crisis. Understandably, legal counsel wants to avoid any statement that could be used as ammunition against their client, especially if the cause is unknown or known affirmatively not to be the

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ABOUT ELEVATE MARKETING ADVISORS

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- Invest in Relationships
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Navigating Through Crisis Part 2: Accept Responsibility, continued

client's fault. It's reasonable to fear that any expression of empathy, sorrow, or regret could be misinterpreted as admitting fault.

But the granddaddy of all crisis communications case studies, the Tylenol poisoning case of 1982, remains a textbook example of taking responsibility and bouncing forward, not back.

When seven people ranging from 12 to 35 years old died of potassium cyanide poisoning, Tylenol's maker, McNeil Consumer Products, a subsidiary of Johnson & Johnson, could have said nothing while the crime was under investigation. It could have denied and deflected, essentially saying, "It wasn't our fault. Our product was tampered with after it left our custody. Drugstores must exercise greater vigilance and care to prevent a lone individual with evil intentions from harming people."

But we know that Tylenol's maker did not hide or deflect responsibility. Instead, the company issued warnings, recalled products, changed their packaging, and as a result, raised the bar for an entire industry's consumer protection. It wasn't easy and it cost \$100 million. But it also restored Tylenol's position as America's favorite over-the-counter pain medicine. Although private labels and Advil have since surpassed it, Tylenol sales still hover around \$400 million annually.



You are not responsible for everything, but taking responsibility for what you can control, and communicating responsibly about it is the key.

When working with a legal team, keep in mind that federal and state courts have different standards for admissibility and liability in these instances. Exploring with legal counsel on the impact of "I'm sorry" laws in the jurisdiction where the crisis occurred can inform better decisions about how and what to communicate. Never accept an automatic "no comment" when a humane expression of concern for individuals who have directly suffered harm is the right and prudent thing to do.

With greater transparency and instant digital access to information, the stakes for organizations suffering a breach of trust have never been greater. Whether the cause was an accident, failure, transgression, or terrorism, look for ways to take responsibility for the things you can control — even if the only thing you can control is how your organization expresses care and concern.

Coming Next: Navigating Through Trust Part III: Repair Damage