

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROTECTING YOUR REPUTATION AND REGAINING CONTROL DURING A PR CRISIS

The following blog article, produced by Forbes., discusses the importance of reputation management during a crisis.

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March 13, 2016

Our college years are some of the best years of our lives, and my college experience was one for the books. I graduated from the University of Missouri in Columbia, and I have nothing but good things to say about the school and my time there. I actually talk about my time there a lot, and I'd consider myself a pretty vocal, positive brand advocate for my alma mater.

And like any strong brand advocate feels when the brand he or she knows and loves receives negative attention (from other consumers and from the media overall), I was crushed by the news last fall involving my alma mater.

The stress and hostility of any kind of crisis can create a rough environment. So much national media attention was being given to this. And when so many other people are out there talking about your brand in negative ways, it's harder to regain control of the conversation, communicate your message, and take your next steps.

As an alumnus, I was devastated; as a marketing and communications leader, I was terrified. The thought of losing control over a brand and messaging scares the hell out of me — the idea that someone else is now in complete control of your message is dangerous.

Different industries and institutions take different approaches to various crises. While it probably wouldn't have helped my alma mater avoid or overcome this particular crisis, content can be very valuable for other brands in PR and communication battles.

Take Apple, for example. Right now, Apple is battling the FBI over privacy and security, and a lot of media attention is being directed here, too. Rather than letting everyone else control the conversation, Apple CEO Tim Cook wrote a letter — "A Message to Our Customers" — that detailed the situation and the company's stance. This effectively put the brand back in the driver's seat. We're now having a different conversation about this situation because of this clear and honest letter. And that's the power of quality, authentic content.

Now, the battle isn't over. Depending on what you read online, Apple's opposition to the FBI's order to build a back door to the iPhone is an important step in defense of tech security, and others are supporting the brand for it. But not everyone is so supportive, and there's a lot of back and forth over whether this will work in Apple's favor.

Whatever your views are on this topic, there's no denying that Cook's letter was an important decision and an effective way for the brand to control the conversation. And it's a great reminder for business leaders to always control the message from their respective companies. To go into a shell and stop communication during hard times like these just creates a void for someone else to fill with his or her own ideas and information.

Here are three ways to use content to control your messaging and conversation during the hard times:

1. Be proactive about your reputation.

Too often, people wait until it's too late, and they have to crawl their way out of crises. It's a lot easier and more effective to create and manage a positive reputation than it is to run damage control on a tarnished one.

Simple things like consistently creating good content and surrounding yourself and your brand with that content is important, which is why my team and I use company knowledge banks to streamline content creation and stay proactive about our brand. (To create your own, download this customizable knowledge management template.)

When you have so much quality content around your brand, you'll stay top of mind with people who know and trust you as a valuable resource. As a result, negative press is less likely to leave a lasting scar on your reputation because people will have gotten to know you through all of the value you've delivered to them.

2. Don't be scared to be authentic and have a voice.

I will never stop referencing Target CMO Jeff Jones' article, "The Truth Hurts," as one of the best examples of authentic, human content coming from a brand. When Target was under consistent fire and undergoing big changes, many consumers started to lose faith and lose trust in the Target brand.

Target's massive data breach combined with its CEO's departure fueled a major PR crisis, and rather than hiding from it, Jones embraced his own voice and communicated an honest message with authenticity. The content he created to communicate his message humanized the Target brand; it wasn't a canned response to media questions and attacks. It was honest and bold and received a positive response from consumers.

3. Create brand advocates and amplifiers through consistency.

When you experience crisis, it's vital to have an army of brand advocates to help you amplify your message, but to build that army, you have to create and distribute content to them consistently. This is probably the hardest for many companies because it requires consistent commitment, but it's also the most important.

One or two articles here and there aren't enough to build the kind of army of positive brand advocates you need to help overcome a crisis. You have to earn it through consistent content. For example, HubSpot recently dealt with a crazy amount of negative PR over a scandal about an upcoming book involving the company. But because HubSpot so consistently creates content its audience finds valuable, it had the brand advocates and amplifiers to help it quickly overcome much of the backlash from the scandal.

These examples should be wake-up calls to leaders about how quickly things can turn upside down (and how easily others can take control of your message if you let them). Fortunately, we live in a world where we have access to countless outlets and platforms to communicate — but it's up to us to take advantage of them. Begin putting processes in place now to create and distribute content so that when a crisis strikes, you can be prepared to control it.

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