

Are you a reputational resilience expert or crisis fodder?

By [Daniel Munslow](#)

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No one really thinks it will ever happen to them. That is, until the dominoes of disaster start falling when the next crisis breaks, and the next unsuspecting exco and communication management team have to go into full swing to protect the company's reputation.



Daniel Munslow, independent communications consultant.

2017 was not a good year for companies handling crises. The number of casualties was alarming. We had our pick of it – from motoring, to beverages, to aviation, and everything in between.

You know the names! Ford and the Kuga fires; United Airlines' 'Removal of a Passenger'; Adidas' 'Insensitive Boston Marathon Email'; Uber's handling of seemingly unrelated crises; Steinhoff's exposé that could lead them to become the biggest bankruptcy in South African corporate history; Unilever's Dove ad; to name but a few...

Some did better than others. Some failed in round one, but at least went back for round two and got it right then. Some never bothered to try harder.

Plan for a crisis

While communication professionals should know how critical it is to plan for crises, it remains clear that many are woefully unprepared when a crisis hits. As we enter 2018, we pause to consider what we could be doing better. How could a little – or appropriate – level of annual preparation help pave the way to be ready for a crisis?

It's all in the terminology. A good communications expert knows when an issue is escalating, and what to do to prevent it from becoming a crisis. Or, if already a crisis, what steps to take to mitigate the reputational impact.

Ford is a now classic case study of what not to do – the issues were not tackled for months leading to the 'crisis'; and once they were in crisis mode did not adequately address three basic phases: tell all and tell fast; clarify the facts; and share what you are doing about it now and what will be done to prevent it from happening again (there's a lot to be said under each banner, and a few tips are below).

Show empathy

It's about a scary 7-letter word that so many companies don't have in their vocabulary: apology. When a brand mishap occurs, genuinely apologise. Few people are beyond understanding that things can go wrong. But if you don't show empathy, you're dead in the water.

Here is an example: Adidas issued an apology after a marketing email to customers who participated in the 2017 Boston Marathon was branded "insensitive" and "extremely inappropriate". The email, sent out by Adidas Running, carried the subject line: "Congrats, you survived the Boston Marathon!" The wording was slammed on social media, with recipients deeming it "too soon" after the attack on the 2013 Boston Marathon, in which three people were killed and more than 250 injured, after two bombs were detonated close to the finish line.

What did Adidas do? They apologised for the email.

“ pic.twitter.com/cdBKixwSqT— adidas (@adidasUS) [April 18, 2017](#) ”

This is how you do it right:

- **Don't fake anything.** If you spin information, your head will be spinning from all the negative coverage you're going to get.
- **Leverage your supporters.** You have many. Probably more than you think. Talk to them, listen to them, respect them. We all have the channels to do so these days. Deep down your stakeholders know your brand values, and seeing as you've spent tens of millions building up your brand equity, now's the time to tap in to it.
- **Respond immediately.** When a crisis hits – be it a cyber breach, a product recall, a controversial ad campaign, or anything else – stakeholders expect an immediate response. Your pre-prepared holding statement along with your messaging matrix is your passport. Don't have one ready? It will take you longer to get the initial acknowledgment out, leading to people thinking you are not taking immediate steps to respond appropriately.
- **Make sure you have a clear and concise statement ready.** Risk, Compliance, Legal and preferably Investor Relations should have all given the thumbs up. Experience proves that the public responds well to organisations which take responsibility and apologise for the issue at hand. Keep to the facts, especially in the early stages when you might not know all the facts yourself.
- **Don't delay communication.** This is a mistake many organisations continue to make. Sometimes it's the leaders who don't buy-in to what the comms team is saying. Sometimes the comms team isn't sure what to say. Sometimes they are given bad advice. However you look at it, delays result in a no-win scenario. In the era of social media, the longer you wait the greater the chances of stakeholder trust breaking down.
- **Offer ongoing updates.** Keep people informed and focused on how you are managing the situation. The name of the game is information, and if people cannot get it from you, they will get it somewhere else. Chances are that won't work in your favour.
- **Be as honest and transparent as possible.** You need to preserve public trust and credibility and the only way to do that is to share information honestly. Yes, there are realities, and you may need to check specifics with legal. But the

principles don't change.

- **Keep employees informed.** It's so easy to forget that employees are seeing all the same media as everyone else, and it affects them to. A simple update can put things in to perspective for them.

All things said and done, it will be the organisations that understand, protect and enhance their reputational assets that will maintain shareholder value and brand equity in the long run. The real question is, will you be one of them in 2018?

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