

Crisis Communication in the Age of Digital Media

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Abstract: *It is known that every organization or company is vulnerable to crises. In the age of Social Media, used effectively, public relations can prevent a critical situation from resulting in irreparable damage to the business's reputation. In order to understand the importance of public relations, we have chosen to present a real case of crisis communication, an example of how not to manage a crisis, Carolina Girls, which gives us the opportunity to display our take on a situation like this, together with our suggestions on how the situation should have been managed from a PR standpoint.*

Keywords: *crisis communication, digital media, crisis management, public relations*

1. Crisis Communication

In the information age, also known as the digital age, "going viral" is not always a positive thing. This is a period characterised by a significant change in the way people interact with businesses and each other. Because information is free and readily available for everyone, the

distribution of power between organizations and customers has changed.

The digital age allows the customer to access the latest information. Because of that, they can now filter what they see in social media about products and brands. We can say that, in this new age, the customer, rather than the brand, controls the interaction. But what do we do when going viral affects our organization or our brand? Bad news travels instantly and is very important to act quickly in order to avoid misinterpretation.

1.1. Defining crisis communication

A crisis is seen as a sequence of unwanted events in an organization, which leads to uncertainty and causes major harm to the organization and its employees. It is very important for an organization to sense the early signs of crisis and warn the employees about the negative consequences, as a crisis not only affects the smooth functioning of the organization but also poses a threat to the brand name.

Crisis communication deals with the reputation of the individuals as well as of the organization. In other words, crisis communication **is an initiative that aims at protecting the reputation of the organization and maintaining its public image** (Coman, 2009, pp. 3-18).

Egelhoff and Sen define crisis communication as the result of “environmental threats correlated with the organization's weaknesses; it occurs when environmental threats interact with the weaknesses in the organization” (Egelhoff and Sen, 1992, p. 447).

In the past, organizational crises were considered a threat to the activity of an organization. A fire could cripple production, a damaged machine would not meet the demand for products, and a massive storm could block the railways. However, crises also have a reputational element. Barton considers that a crisis does inflict harm on the organization’s reputation because of the negative information

it generates about the organization (Barton, 2001, pp. 225-262). Nowadays, it is appropriate to distinguish between operational crises and reputational crises (Sohn & Lariscy, 2014, pp. 23-43). We have to take into consideration that a crisis can affect both, but one of the two factors may dominate a crisis.

There are many different definitions of a crisis, but what is very important to know is the fact that a crisis can have negative consequences if it is not handled properly. It can create three related threats: public safety, financial loss and reputation loss. All of these threats are interrelated, because, for example, injuries or deaths will reflect in financial and reputation loss, while reputation will affect the financial resources of an organization (Coombs, 2007, p. 3).

In most cases, a crisis is seen as an event that creates or has the potential to create a negative image to an organization and that may affect its profitability, development or even survival (Lerbinger, 1997, p. 4). Coombs and Holladay think that the way in which we define a crisis determines whether we see its interconnection with issues, brand equity and risk (Coombs & Holladay, 2010, p. 5).

1.1.1. Crisis Management

Crisis management can be defined as a process designed to prevent or reduce the damage a crisis can inflict on an organization. Frandsen and Johansen highlight the fact that, in many organizations, crisis management and crisis communication are seen as only one discipline that is based on a very important principle: “no crisis management without communication, and no crisis communication without management, when a crisis breaks out” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017, p. 10).

In fact, we cannot reduce crisis communication to only one operational or tactical activity and wait for the management team to activate it after they have decided which strategy is better to apply in order to handle and solve the crisis. Crisis management is designed to

protect an organization and its stakeholders from threats and/or reduce the impact felt by threats.

1.1.1.1. Stages of Crisis Communication

When we speak about crisis management we see it as only one thing, but as a process, crisis management can be divided into three phases: (1) pre-crisis, (2) crisis response, and (3) post-crisis (Chiciundean & David, 2011, pp. 42; Coombs, 2007, p. 3).

(1) Pre-crisis phase

The pre-crisis phase is concerned with prevention and preparation. For good crisis prevention, mitigation and communication response it is necessary to elaborate a strategic business plan (Coombs & Holladay, 2010, p. 2). Coombs says that prevention involves seeking to reduce known risks that could lead to a crisis. Pre-crisis stage should be considered as a part of an organization's risk management program. As a rule, preparation involves creating the crisis management plan, selecting and training the crisis management team, and conducting exercises to test the crisis management plan. At this phase, the crisis management team has the challenge to face crises before they occur and adopt this stage planning process, because it represents the essential foundation for any effective crisis management (Coombs, 2006, pp. 123-137).

(2) Crisis-response phase

The crisis response phase occurs when the management team must actually respond to a crisis. During this stage, the crisis management team have to face the crisis, assess the situation and be prepared to recommend action. As recommended, it is assumed that there is a crisis management plan, and the crisis team have to implement crisis communication and clearly assign roles and actions. At this stage, there are a lot of tasks that deal with public relations in organizations during

crises. Most of them are related to the mental image of the institution or to solving emerging problems.

If the previous phase has led to the development of crisis plans, then the organization may have a relative control over the way the crisis will trigger. Even so, if the organization cannot prevent and control the crisis, they should be able to control the information that is distributed. This is a very important moment, because the public and the mass media are aware of the crisis and will watch their moves (Coman, 2009, p. 55).

At this stage, the crisis management team and PR specialists have to build strong messages around the framework of compassion and take action related to the context. It is recommended for the company brand and reputation to take genuine and authentic actions that align with the company values and culture. People will remember when a company does the right thing.

(3) Post-crisis phase

Once the crisis is over, the organization should broadcast a final statement which summarizes what happened and the steps that will be taken in order to restore the normal state of facts. At this phase, it is recommended to look for ways to better prepare for the next crisis and to fulfill commitments made during the crisis phase including follow-up information. The post-crisis phase is seen as an opportunity for follow-up communication. The crisis management team should review the lessons learnt from the crisis, which may reduce the likelihood of recurrence and prevent repetition (Coombs & Holladay, 2010, p. 9).

The organization should update their key messages and rely on them in order to provide consistent information to their audiences. It is important to know that reputation repair can be used in the crisis response phase, post-crisis phase or both (Coombs, 2007, p. 9).

1.1.1.2. The Crisis Management Plan

Coombs believes that a crisis management plan is “a reference tool, not a blueprint”. This plan should provide information, remind the organization of what should typically be done in a crisis, and make available for use documents for the crisis response. It is important to know that “a crisis management plan is not a step-by-step guide, but it helps the team to save time during a crisis by pre-assigning some tasks, pre-collecting some information, and serving as a reference source” (Coombs, 2007, p. 4).

The documents drawn up for the crisis management plan should also include details about the audiences, contact information and messaging. During a crisis, this information must be easily accessible, reviewed, tested and constantly updated.

1.1.1.3. The Crisis Management Team

The crisis management team manages events, potential risks and the harm caused by the crisis. Whether an organization is preparing a plan in case of a crisis or is caught in an ongoing crisis, one of the biggest factors that will determine success or failure is the strength of the crisis management team. In order to create a strong team, it is very important to choose the right people, according to their individual strengths.

A strong and effective crisis management team should be tested regularly. The core members of the group will help to analyze the circumstances, determine if the plan works for action, and implement it in order to minimize the damage caused by the crisis. A crisis management team is very valuable for an organization, because the team has already decided on who will do the specific tasks required in a crisis. The result of all these actions saves time (Coombs, 2007, p. 4).

1.1.2. Role of Public Relations in Crisis Communication

Crisis communication specialists strive hard to overcome tough

situations and help the organization come out of difficult situations in the best possible and quickest way. For this reason, public relations specialists play a key role in preparing spokespersons for handling questions from the news media. In crisis management, the media relations element of public relations is a highly valued skill. The public relations team is responsible for providing training and support, because in most cases, they are not the spokespersons during the crisis (Coombs, 2007, p. 4).

Effective crisis management is highlighted by the sequential way in which the threats are handled. In all organizations, the primary concern in a crisis has to be public safety. That is why, understanding public perception on the risk is essential. A good PR specialist should find out how the public perceives the risk and should take that into consideration when communicating anything. Therefore, the communication effort should be directed towards understanding the risk. Also, it is very important to involve the press in this process in order to better understand the story if problems arise .

It is known that a crisis may affect the reputation of an organization, but also the credibility, legitimacy and development of an entire field. The role of a public relations and communication specialist is a strategic one. They should be able to handle the situation in a very professional way and should know that everything they do (talking about crisis communication or implementing a communication plan) has one ultimate goal: to overcome the crisis situation and to restore the confidence in the organization image and culture.

During the crisis, honesty is essential. The organization has to speak from the point of view of public interest, not of its own interest. It is very important for the organization to be transparent, because this means total openness to the public information requirements and those who are responsible to inform the mass media and journalists (Coman, 2009, p. 112).

Moreover, media communication, the external but also the

internal one, must be coordinated by a trained and capable person who has in-depth knowledge of the activities and characteristics of the organization. In most cases, the PR specialist is the one who saves, recomposes or recreates the image of an organization affected by a crisis.

2. Case Study: Carolina Girls

2.1. Description

In order to have a better understanding of all the concepts discussed above and to further deepen our research about the subject, we have chosen to present a real case of crisis communication, analysing how it happened and the manner in which it was managed. The case we have chosen is an example of *how not to manage a crisis*, which gives us the opportunity to display our take on a situation like this, together with our suggestions on how the situation should have been managed from a PR standpoint.

The case takes place in the summer of 2016, in South Carolina, USA, the homeland of the jewelry and gift store Carolina Girls, but also of Casey Parham, a teenage girl of colour who spends her summers at her family home in Kiawah Island. The story starts with Casey walking into the jewelry store with her friend, looking for a new wallet. As soon as she walks in, one of the salespersons, a middle-aged white woman, turns to her younger colleague and allegedly says the word “shoplifter” whilst subtly pointing at the teenage girl. The saleswomen giggle and Casey immediately puts the wallet back and leaves the store.

Once home, Casey tells the story to her mother, Rene Syler who, to the store’s misfortune, is a local blogger with a fairly good reach. Upon hearing the news, Rene first shares her daughter’s story on her Facebook Page, where it goes viral. The post gets over 1000 shares and 400 comments and people start leaving negative comments on the store’s official Facebook Page as well. She then shares her story on Twitter as

well. As a response, Carolina Girls posts a public apology to Rene on their official page:



Fig. 1. Carolina Girls' first response (via goodenoughmother.com)

After the official statement, the store sent a personal email to Rene's address reading the following:

"Dear Ms Rene Syler,
We wanted to reach out to you to discuss what happened at our Kiawah Island location yesterday. We are sorry for anything that was said or done by anyone that upset your daughter. We are very aware of the challenges people face in today's society and certainly would never minimize the existence of prejudices. We want you to know that personally we are a multi-cultural family and professionally we are a multi-cultural business. We will be using all of our resources to help us piece together what happened in the store. But in the meantime we wanted to personally apologize to you and daughter."

Another few hours later, the brand released a second statement on their official Facebook Page:



Fig. 2. Carolina Girls' second response (via goodenoughmother.com)

The post inevitably triggered a decent amount of criticism, with people leaving negative comments and opinions all over the internet, in the form of tweets, Facebook mentions, reviews and so on. In response, Carolina Girls started deleting the comments that put them in a bad light, but the one thing they could not delete was the Yelp reviews, as

this particular website does not allow that. Their solution for this matter was to create a fake account, then leaving fake positive reviews to counter all the negative ones. Their next step was to shut down their Facebook Page completely, pulling the head-in-the-ground move and hoping that everything will pass by (Sources: <https://oursocialtimes.com/6-examples-of-social-media-crises-what-can-we-learn/>, <https://www.goodenoughmother.com/2016/08/monday-motivation-dollars-sense-experience-with-carolina-girls/>, accessed on February 22, 2019).

Finally, after everything else had failed, Carolina Girls pulled out their last resort solution: setting up an interview for a news channel, with the owner of the chain. The interview was an attempt to prove their implication and care for the family, but, unfortunately for the brand, all they managed to do was to attract even more attention on the whole situation and more online criticism.

2.1.1. Their Strategy

After getting familiar with the subject, we took a closer look at it, analysing it from three perspectives.

2.1.1.1. Internal Communication

There is no certain way to know exactly the company's internal strategy regarding the crisis, but there are some things we can assume might have happened internally. Taking into consideration the brand's public responses, we can assume that their Social Media Manager was instructed to act as fast as possible in crisis situations, giving the Public Relations Team time to react and come up with a more detailed and competent response.

Now, it was time for them to start acting in accordance with their crisis plan, or, if not properly prepared, start planning their course of action. The following messages the chain released show at least some kind of internal communication, as they state an extensive investigation

has been conducted in that location of the chain. We are led to believe someone with a higher hierarchical level has visited or at least contacted the employees of that particular location. However, there is no possible way for us to know whether the culprit was found or not, since we can never know if the second release was true or just a cover-up.

After realising their efforts did not pay off, we assume their internal communication intensified and, as we see it, the process could have taken one out of two turns. They either hosted a brainstorming session and the best solution they could come up with was the idea of “going under” and hoping everything will go away, or a state of chaos has taken over the team in charge with crisis management, which resulted in their Facebook page being closed.

2.1.1.2. Public and Mass-Media Communication

Even if their internal communication process is not public information, the store’s external communication strategy was more conspicuous. Obviously, their first step was to release a statement as quickly as possible. Their first statement was an apology to Rene and her daughter and an assurance that measures will be taken.

The second step was to send a private email directly to Mrs. Syler with a personal apology and, again, assurance that the case will be looked into.

Next, they posted a second response on their social media, assuring both the victims and the general public that the matter had been investigated, and that they were sure the bullying did not come from one of their employees, but instead, from another client present in the shop at the same time as Casey. They also apologized once again and said they would reach out to Rene Syler privately.

Now steering away from the new media towards the traditional ones, Carolina Girls also tried to implement a strategy regarding mass-media communication. Carolina Girls did reach out to a local news channel, in an attempt to prove they did everything in their power to meet with Rene and her daughter and set things straight once and for

all. The interview was given by the owner of the store chain, Stephanie Davis, but it did not meet expectations.

2.1.1.3. Structure and Quality of the Message

Although the strategies the brand used were fairly legitimate in theory, it was practice where they really lacked expertise. For us, it is obvious that the company's intentions were generally good; however, the composition and approach of their messages were particularly poor. Naturally, we are going to start by analysing the first Facebook post, which read the following:

“As a business we are very sad to see these comments on our social media. We take pride in serving all of our customers with respect and enthusiasm every single day. Please trust that we will absolutely look into exactly what happened yesterday. To Ms Rene Syler, we truly apologize for anything anyone said or did that upset your daughter during her time in our store. We will be reaching out to you to discuss what happened and hopefully we can move forward in a positive way.” (source: goodenoughmother.com)

As far as their first response is concerned, the overall message was actually reasonable, although the very beginning of it could have been better. In our opinion, it was not the best idea to start off with a self-centered sentence. The fact that they chose to open the statement with the idea of them being sad because of their imagine being harmed makes them look slightly self-centered and tactless. A better tactic would have been to begin with either the apology itself or the acknowledgement of the situation.

The next part of the statement was appropriate, we believe. They did apologise and address the fact that the situation needed more attention on their part. They also stated they would reach out to the victim personally, which again, was a wise call. Whether they actually complied or not is to be discussed further on. All in all, we consider that, as a public apology, this was a completely acceptable one and, if they

were to stop there with their social media actions, the situation would have looked at least slightly better for them in the end.

The next part of their communication strategy was contacting Mrs. Syler personally, via email:

“Dear Ms Rene Syler,

We wanted to reach out to you to discuss what happened at our Kiawah Island location yesterday. We are sorry for anything that was said or done by anyone that upset your daughter. We are very aware of the challenges people face in today’s society and certainly would never minimize the existence of prejudices. We want you to know that personally we are a multi-cultural family and professionally we are a multi-cultural business. We will be using all of our resources to help us piece together what happened in the store. But in the meantime we wanted to personally apologize to you and daughter.

Carolina Girls

Charleston, SC” (source: goodenoughmother.com)

In our opinion, the idea of sending a private email to the victim, since her email address was public on her blog, was a good one, as in theory, it gave her a way of writing to them privately, as well as establishing a more personal connection. Unfortunately, the message and the overall structure of the email was not the best. However, let us start with the positive aspects. First of all, they do apologise twice in the email and they do address the challenges black people may face in today’s society. Secondly, a good approach they used was referencing their own family and therefore giving the problem a more personal feel and, at the same time, giving an insight into their own family values as well. Along with this, they reassured Rene of the fact that the matter will indeed be closely analysed.

On the other hand, this email had some mistakes that unfortunately took away the good intentions the brand may have originally had. The most obvious mistake from our perspective is the fact that the email is not signed by a person, but rather generically, by their brand. This makes all of their previous efforts to look and feel more personal fade away, since the whole strategy would be to make the email

feel as if the connection is with a real person, and not a cold and impersonal company. This truly distracts from the apology seeming heartfelt. Another mistake was not to make a clear invitation and set a face-to-face meeting.

The third and last written piece of communication they provided was their second Facebook post:

“We have conducted an extensive investigation into what actually transpired at our store yesterday. After an in-depth inquiry conducted with every employee at the store, not one of them witnessed any such incident as has been alleged. We are as shocked as the rest of you that this type of slur would be uttered anywhere near, much less in our store. We can only conclude that the comment may have come from young shoppers in the store at the same time as Ms. Parham. Since none of our employees saw Ms. Parham either, it would be difficult to verify, but one thing that is certain is that we have zero tolerance for any slight or mistreatment of even one of our valued clientele. If this had occurred at our store, the employee would no longer be in our hire. While we are greatly relieved that this was not a comment made by one of our employees, we can’t be held responsible for the actions of shoppers in the store. This is not behavior we’re accustomed to seeing, and we’re very sorry that anyone patronizing our store would offer such an inappropriate accusation as this, simply to be hurtful. That is not our culture and it’s not our style. We’re sorry for the consternation this alleged incident created. We are relieved to report the result of our inquiry but are sorry if it did in fact happen in our store. We’ll reach out to Ms. Syler privately as well and hope we can get her into the store for the positive experience we are devoted to delivering to every customer who walks in the door.” (source: goodenoughmother.com)

This message is where they really missed the mark, by not knowing where to stop. In their despair of clearing the brand’s name, they made the unacceptable mistake of implying that the victim had lied. The way the writer built this statement makes it sound fake and accusatory.

The beginning of the message tries to explain their efforts to unfold what exactly happened at the store, but ends up being terribly vague and unverifiable. They even admit that it is virtually impossible to certify who exactly spoke the demeaning words. Moving forward, the writer continues with his second mistake of tossing the blame. It is no secret that everybody’s first reaction to an accusation is denial, but

blaming the misstep on their own clients who, at the end of the day are the ones who bring them the profit, only made them look even more repulsive to their own audience. Even if that was indeed the case, this was not the way to handle the situation. In the following sentences, the brand states twice that they are relieved not to be the culprit after all, making it seem as if they had tangible proof to clear their employees' names.

In the end, they express their wish to contact Ms. Syler privately again and finally set a face-to-face meeting. As Rene declared on her blog and social media posts, this never materialized, but even if it had, we believe it would have already been too late. In our opinion, this should have been one of their first steps in figuring what happened at the store. Meeting them in person would have given Rene and Casey the chance to further explain the course of action of that day and, at the same time, create the impression of being more involved and actually making an effort to find the truth.

2.1.2. Risk Management

What the brand California Girls did by poorly managing this crisis situation was, first and foremost, seriously harm their brand image. Secondly, by not knowing how to react to a crisis situation, they undoubtedly lost some fans and brought a lot of negative attention to themselves. Also, the closure of their official Facebook Page cost them a two-month gap in their social media posts, meaning a two-month gap in their social media presence and marketing, between July and September 2016.

Although this may not seem such great loss for a rather big company, we would like to emphasize how quickly the situation escalated, taking a toll on the whole chain as a result of the ignorance of one particular employee in one particular location.

Conclusions

Public Relations Specialist's Perspective

After analysing the Carolina Girls case, as PR specialists, we can safely say that the company's approach to managing a crisis situation was highly unprofessional and immensely defective. However, they did not start on the wrong foot from the very beginning, their first response to the accusations being close to what a public relations or crisis communication specialist would have probably done.

Swiftness is crucial when dealing with a crisis, therefore giving a fast response, acknowledging and addressing the problem as soon as it occurs should always be a priority. This is why, Carolina Girls' fast public response on their Facebook Page was a very good idea. It is true, the message could have been written better, in a less egocentric manner but, all in all, they did apologise and address the situation as soon as they could. If they had stopped there with their public statements, the situation would have never deteriorated as bad as it did. Next, they tried to establish a more personal connection with the victim which, from a PR perspective, is again a very important step in such situations. However, not signing a direct email with the name of the person who wrote it and instead signing it generically with the company's name does not accomplish that. People want to talk and connect to other people, equal to them, not to businesses or brands. At this stage of the crisis, the recommended course of action would be trying to initiate a face-to-face meeting with the alleged victim in order to strengthen the personal connection and show involvement. The company could have easily avoid what followed by simply composing a better message and meeting with the victim in person. If the meeting had gone decently, the crisis might have ended there.

Despite everything else, the brand's second and final public statement was undoubtedly the worst decision they could have made, at least from a PR standpoint. In managing a crisis, some of the worst things a company can do is lie, blame the alleged mistake on somebody else without having any proof, or be insensitive to the parts involved.

With their last statement, Carolina Girls made all these three mistakes at once. Of course, we cannot know whether they lied about the investigation conducted, but we do know they lied about setting a meeting with the mother and daughter. Moreover, they blatantly called the victim a liar and relentlessly blamed the racist remark on another shopper, another client of theirs, after all. In our opinion, this is where they completely lost the fight. These were all solutions that a crisis communication specialist would have never advised upon doing. The natural response from their audience was unsurprisingly critique and anger. Consequently, this triggered another reprehensible idea on the company's part. Deleting bad reviews and creating fake positive ones should never be a solution for anything. People eventually figured it out and the audience only got more and more outraged. At that moment, the lack of public relations expertise was obvious, which is why the next move did not shock us. To put an end to everything, Carolina Girls chose the "head in the sand" strategy, by deleting their entire official page and putting a stop to any kind of public communication. A good communicator knows that hiding everything under the mat is never the best way to avoid criticism.

To sum it all up, Carolina Girls' reaction to this particular crisis situation was not the best. Their crisis communication strategy lacked professionalism and cost them their brand image. It is true that a racial accusation is not an easy subject to deal with, as it asks for some degree of crisis communication and public relations expertise, which not every medium-sized company affords, but the brand could have at least shown more diplomacy and compassion in managing the problem.

Suggestions for Better Crisis Management

It is known that every organization or company is vulnerable to crises. Used effectively, public relations, even if we talk about outsourced public relations if the company does not have an internal department, can prevent a critical situation from resulting in irreparable damage to the business's reputation.

After presenting and analysing the Carolina Girls case, we can certainly say that there was a lack of communication. If they really want to recover from the effects of the crisis they have gone through, they must improve their communication, because it is an essential part of trying to control any crisis situation. It is the responsibility of the company to provide information about what is happening and what the company is planning to do to solve the problem.

In order to improve their image and avoid or prevent such crisis situations, we suggest they organise an awareness training for their employees. In addition, they need to review the situation, learn from it and also consult a public relations specialist to help them set the next direction of communication for the company. We believe that public relations is the backbone of any company, as it is the administrative system which cares about the image of the company inside and outside.

The technological advancements in communication and information processes have greatly impacted our daily lives. In the age of digital communication and social media, information can be accessed very quickly and people are able to share experiences and opinions across borders and time constraints. That is why, it is of utmost importance for any organization or institution to react and be prepared to face a crisis, to hopefully prevent a crisis, to quickly end the crisis or to meet the crisis as a challenge and create a positive opportunity.

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