

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS IN A SOCIAL MEDIA WORLD

PRESENTATION TO WCFKL 2015



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When I spoke in Davos three years ago, I talked about the disappearance of privacy...

I talked about how there used to be this idea that if you were a respectable person, there were only three occasions on which you were ever supposed to be mentioned in the press: when you were BORN, when you were MARRIED, and when you DIED. Or, as the English liked to put it: when you were hatched, matched, and dispatched.

That sort of thing is ancient history now. Thanks mainly to the Internet and social media, privacy is increasingly considered an obsolete concept these days.

I used to blame the decline of privacy mainly on the news media.

The extent to which news organizations – big and respectable ones like The New York Times as well as big and shameless ones like Rupert Murdoch's tabloids – have become increasingly intrusive, addicted to gossip, and obsessed with the rich and famous.

But the press is becoming increasingly irrelevant. In 2015, it's not about the news media anymore. It's all about social media.

We live in a world in which sharing everything about one's life is increasingly the norm. Where you're going on vacation or who you're dating, what you ate for dinner last night, how you're going to vote in the next election – for a millennium of years, and for the as yet unnamed generation that's following them, sharing this kind of personal information via social media is the norm.

I look at my 12-yr-old daughter and her friends – they all live on social media – on Twitter and Instagram and Snapchat and a variety of other platforms you and I have never heard of.

As a result, there's been a profound shift in mainstream attitudes towards privacy – a shift in what we regard as being of legitimate public interest and what (if anything) we agree should remain private.

The scary thing is that there are plenty of people who would argue that privacy is not only obsolete – it is actually evil. They argue that the more transparent we are, the better (or more moral) our behavior will be. As the editor of a particularly noxious tabloid put it, privacy is for pedophiles. Nobody else needs it.

We'll leave that debate to another day. The point is, we're all potential celebrities now. It's not simply that everybody seems to want to be famous these days. It's that thanks to the Internet and social media, everybody can be famous – whether they want to be or not. For anyone who doubts that, I have two words for you: Ashley Madison.

About ten or fifteen years ago, I started telling my celebrity clients that there was no such thing anymore as a purely local story. Because of the Internet, an embarrassing item in even the most obscure small-town news outlet now had the ability to be picked up and circulated globally in the blink of an eye.

Well, today, by the same token, there is no longer any such thing as a purely private or personal story – or a purely private or personal person, for that matter. Not when most social networks are deliberately designed to make it as hard as possible to limit how much we share. And remember, it's not just the cute video of your cat – or your toddler – that can suddenly go viral and be seen by literally millions of people around the world.

So what does this mean for crisis communications? Well, let's take a step back for a second and think about the dynamics of crisis management.

One thing I've learned in the 20 or so years I've been doing crisis PR is that in most fights, the worst blows tend to be self-inflicted. In other words, the worst danger rarely comes from your supposed adversaries. The person you need to worry about most in a crisis is yourself.

It's not what the other guy does to you; it's the stupid or short-sighted things you do to yourself.

The dumb things you say.

The shortcuts you can't resist trying to take.

The half-truths you try to get away with.

And nothing fosters stupid or short-sighted behavior more than social media.

I was quoted not long ago in the Washington Post as saying that giving a Twitter account to a celebrity is like handing a loaded gun to a small child. I wasn't exaggerating. And it's not just celebrities who often don't know what they're doing when they fool around with social media. It's most of us. It's just that we pay more attention when celebrities screw up.

So what are the big mistakes we make and how can we avoid them? Here are a few thoughts.

Whether we're a giant corporation or an obscure individual, social media gives us the ability to speak to a global audience – immediately and directly. This is an awesome power that should give us pause. Unfortunately, in too many instances it doesn't. We are so eager to become part of the conversation – to get in our two cents, as the saying goes – that we speak (or post) without thinking.

You may remember the poor woman who was fired a few years ago as head of corporate communications for Barry Diller's company, IAC. In the blink of an eye, she went from being an unknown PR person to one of the most hated people on the planet – all because of a stupid tweet she sent her friends as she boarded an airplane for a business trip. "Going to Africa," she tweeted. "Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding, I'm white!"

The woman's Twitter account had only 170 follows, but her tweet was spotted by a tech writer who re-tweeted to his 15,000 followers. Within hours it had gone viral and by the time her plane landed in South Africa, she had been fired from her job.

Where did she go wrong? Well, to begin with, there's obviously no place in civilized society for racist jokes, even if they're meant ironically. And, two, she clearly forgot – or perhaps didn't realize – that there's no such thing as a private conversation on social media. Even if you have only a handful of followers, all it takes is one person to re-tweet or re-post or re-whatever your comment and it's off to the races... which is exactly what happened here.

Rule #1: Think before you post.

Think *hard* before you post. The stupid joke that you think is so witty after three Scotches may not seem so clever in the cold light of day. And hoping no one will notice is a bad strategy. The posting that goes viral is always the one you were hoping everyone would ignore.

Of course there are times when one intends to be heard but the message is just wrong. Often, this happens when a celebrity or a company is so eager to become part of an ongoing conversation that they jump in a bit too quickly, without fully understanding what the subject is.

Classic example is the actor Ashton Kutcher Tweeting his outrage over the firing of a famous college football coach in 2011. What Kutcher didn't realize when he hit the send button, is that the coach had been implicated in a notorious child abuse case. He's still living it down.

And it's not just dumb celebrities. Trending topics are hard for corporate marketing people to resist. But you need to look before you leap.

This time last year, the U.S. was transfixed by a disturbing hotel video footage of a football star punching his wife. Within, 24 hours of the video being posted, there were over 46,000 Tweets using the hashtag #WhyIStayed, most of them poignant messages from women explaining what made them stay in abusive relationships.

Trying to capitalize on the trend, DiGiorno Pizza Tweeted, “#WhyIStayed You had pizza.” A big mistake! Within minutes, they were inundated with outrage, forcing them to Tweet an apology stating that they hadn’t been aware of the significance of the hashtag.

The point is that while timeliness is certainly important when it comes to social media, you can always afford to wait a few minutes to make sure you know what you’re talking about before you risk poking fun at someone or something serious.

Rule #2: Do your homework.

Don’t jump onto a trending hashtag without first making sure you understand the context. Unless you’re absolutely sure you know what you’re talking about, keep your mouth shut. “When in doubt, do not tweet it out.”

And this applies even when you think you’re doing something perfectly safe. Here’s an example that embarrassed me. This time last year, for reasons I won’t go into now, I was serving as chairman of the board of a very trendy clothing company called American Apparel. Now among other things, American Apparel was and is known for its edgy marketing and advertising. But in this particular situation, we were doing something everyone thought would be totally safe.

On the eve of America’s 4th of July holiday – our independence day – one of our young social media managers decided to mark the occasion by posting a photo of fireworks on the company’s Tumblr account. Nothing edgy or controversial about that!

Only problem was that the photo she posted wasn’t of holiday fireworks. It was a famous shot of the tragic 1986 explosion of the space shuttle Challenger. And boy did that go viral in a hurry.

Although we took the post down immediately and apologized for the mistake, the company (and me as its chairman) came off looking monumentally stupid, both insensitive and ignorant – which I can assure you is not good for business.

The lesson here: Don’t just grab the first cool-looking photo you find on Google Image and post it. Take the time to make sure you understand exactly what it is.

Another danger with social media is forgetting how easy it is to put a “kick me” sign on your back without realizing it. Even some pretty sophisticated players make this mistake.

Take JP Morgan Chase, one of the biggest and most powerful financial institutions in the world. In 2013, some genius at the bank thought it might be a good idea to hold a Twitter Q&A using #AskJPM. Not only was this in the aftermath of the worldwide economic meltdown and the whole Occupy Wall Street movement, but there was also the fact that JP Morgan Chase has been the target of criminal investigations related to the manipulation of world financial markets.

So you can imagine the response the bank got when it began soliciting tweets. They were overwhelmingly vicious and vituperative. SO much so that the bank withdrew from the Q&A the evening before it was supposed to go live.

The NYPD had a similar experience last year, when it invited the public to share photos of interactions with the police under #myNYPD (“Do you have a photo with a member of the NYPD? Tweet us & tag it #myNYPD”) – results were pretty horrific.

Rule #3: Think about your audience.

Just because you have a high opinion of yourself, that doesn't mean everyone else does. And never host an online Q&A – or publicly invite public comment – unless you are absolutely sure that your reputation is beyond reproach. And even then be prepared to get trolled.

I could go on, but you get the point. Social media can be incredibly powerful – and like many powerful tools, it can be a double-edged sword. If you're not careful, you can wind up injuring yourself quite badly.

On the other hand, if you know what you're doing, if you use it properly, social media can be a good thing – a potent force that can level the playing field for individuals and marginalized institutions that in the past may have found it difficult to get their voices heard. I'll give you one example of how this can play out in my line of work.

The last time I spoke to this group I told the story of how, about ten years ago, I helped the cast of The Simpsons get a better contract out of Fox. It was a relatively complicated story involving agents, lawyers, and a forensic accountant, and it hinged on my ability to convince the New York Times to accurately report what we had discovered about the show's economics.

Well, earlier this year, The Simpsons cast went through another contract renegotiation, and this time it played out quite differently. This time most of the cast didn't feel like fighting with Fox, but there was one exception. That was Harry Shearer – who provides the voice of a variety of characters, including Ned Flanders and Mr. Burns.

Harry is a fighter, and he was not about to roll over for the studio. So what did he do? Instead of deploying a cadre of professionals, like he and the others did back in 2004, he simply sent out a Tweet to his fans hinting that his contract talks weren't going well and he might not be returning to the show.

Of course the fans went crazy. So crazy, that a few days later Jim Brooks threw in the towel. He sent out a Tweet of his own, telling Shearer: "We're still trying. Harry, no kidding, let's talk." A deal was subsequently made and Shearer will be back for Season 27 this fall.

(Director David Lynch did the same thing telling his "Twitter friends" in April that he would not, after all, be returning to reboot his classic TV mystery "Twin Peaks" for Showtime: "After one year and four months of negotiations, I left because not enough money was offered to do the script the way I felt it needed to be done." Fan outrage ensued and Showtime came up with the money Lynch needed. "Twin Peaks" is now scheduled to start production next year for a 2017 premiere.)

So it's a new world, thanks to social media. Traditional news media and media relations are not yet irrelevant, but that is certainly the direction they're trending. Why spend time and energy trying to persuade reporters, editors, and news producers to tell your story – with no guarantee that they'll get it right – when you can talk directly to your audience yourself?

That's the beauty of social media. It cuts out the middleman. The thing to keep in mind is that eliminating the middleman means you're working without a net. And that can be a scary prospect. If you don't know what you're doing, it can be downright dangerous.

Thank you.