



BACK TALK

BY SANDER A. FLAUM

In a jam? Do the right thing

Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem that begins, “If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs ...” I’d like to complete that with, “then you understand the basics of crisis management.”

The best time to manage a crisis is before it occurs—when it’s still a risk to be managed. For example, you’re at a party and suddenly blurt out an exaggeration, like, “When I was at Woodstock.” Everyone is duly impressed, but you recognize a more accurate statement would have been, “When I was watching a documentary about Woodstock.” Acknowledge your slip-up ASAP, even if you feel like an idiot.

Don’t blame someone else. Claiming you were misquoted or whining that your website was hacked just makes everything worse. Better to fess up and, if possible, make a joke at your own expense: “If I said I remembered being at Woodstock, I obviously had a brain fade and didn’t take my Geritol.”

We sentimentally recall the good handling of a crisis and its societal positives—but today it’s not a certainty and so difficult to train for and model. Remember back in 1982, when someone poisoned Tylenol capsules with cyanide and put them on supermarket and pharmacy shelves throughout the Chicago area? Seven people died as a result of this still-unsolved crime.

As soon as executives at McNeil Consumer Products, a division of Johnson & Johnson, realized that their product had been adulterated, they ordered an immediate product recall and halted all Tylenol advertising. Even though J&J was blameless, the company took full responsibility, urging people to dispose of any potentially deadly capsules and offering refunds.

After the immediate crisis was over, J&J executives began working on tamper-

resistant packaging to help reduce the risk of anything similar happening again. J&J’s decisive crisis management helped spare the brand and is a textbook example of doing the right thing in an emergency.

But enough ancient history. Let’s look at two current examples. Hillary Clinton has single-handedly managed to keep the issue of her public/private e-mails alive and kicking. A truthful statement of the facts followed by an apology and proposal for remediation could have left this flap in the dust. Instead, her contorted explanations over a period of weeks have kept what might have been a nonstory very much alive.

At around the same time, Israel’s prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, created a huge stir by announcing that he would never endorse a two-state solution. When the media and his rivals accused him of reneging on a previous endorsement of dual statehood, he explained that although he seemed to

have supported a Palestinian state, he really hadn’t done so, so there was no flip-flop. He accurately judged that the uproar didn’t pose a crisis and didn’t require management other than saying, in effect, “Deal with it.”

Lessons? If you sense an impending crisis, get out in front of the story forthwith. If you were at fault, admit it. If you were blindsided, find out what went wrong and fix it. And communicate your concern and engagement to make it right. If there’s nothing to mend, don’t mend it. But whatever you do, see it through with a sense of urgency and keep your head about you.

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