

8 STEPS

TO MANAGING A PR CRISIS

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Every organisation, regardless of its size or industry, has the potential to be hit by a PR crisis.

High performing, well regarded CEOs and MDs can be toppled in a heartbeat, share values can plummet or, at worst, be wiped out, and customers can start running for the hills.

In the case of an organisational crisis, size doesn't matter. It can impact anyone, any time.

Don't believe me?

Ask [BP](#).

Ask [Toyota](#).

Ask [Ryanair](#).

Ask [Phillip Green](#).

GOOD COMPANIES STILL NEED TO PREPARE

With the proliferation of social media channels and rolling 24/7 news programming, the 'control' organisations once had over their corporate message has all but dissolved.

News outlets are required to fill hours of airtime and, when the media get a sniff of a scandal or crisis, it can dominate the news agenda. Just look at the column inches and news programming dedicated to 'Partygate', Travis Scott, Yorkshire Cricket Club and other epic fails like the doomed European Super League in 2021.

More than ever in today's socially-connected world, the reality of an organisation – and how it is perceived by many – can be determined by consumers, rather than the organisation itself.

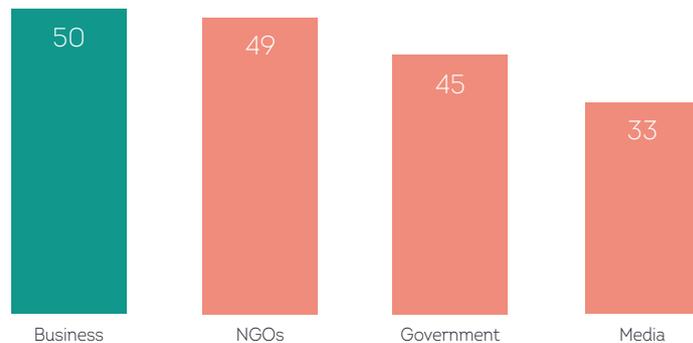
Poor customer service leads to poor reviews. Simple. People read them, and they influence their purchasing decisions...as many as 93% of their decisions according to [The Drum](#).

Low quality products or bad complaint handling leads to social ranting...and every one of the complainant's followers can see. When this happens, consumers are creating perceptions of brands among their peers based on the reality of their experiences.

And with the erosion of public trust in key institutions at crisis point – as discovered in the latest [Edelman Trust Barometer](#) – people's peers are becoming as credible and therefore as influential, as subject matter experts. Business is now more trusted than government in the UK. That provides both risk and opportunity.

Business becomes most trusted institution

Percent trust, in the UK



Bad news stories – particularly when they appear online on one of the really big sites with strong domain authority such as the BBC or Mail Online – can stick around for years.

And one small, candid, tweet, post or review can lead to temporary or permanent organisational meltdown. Ask [Dell about Jeff Jarvis](#).

The fascinating case study Dell has provided though is not about how they managed that issue in the short term, it's about how they've come back in an incredibly consumer engaging way over a longer period. It's taken them time to rebuild. But they have.

It is possible. Just look at how [KFC](#) managed their chicken distribution cock up.

SET THE GROUNDWORK - BE AUTHENTIC

The key starting point to mitigating any major PR or reputational crisis, is to reduce the threat of it happening. That means an organisation – particularly one selling to consumers – needs to deliver on its consumer and brand promises.

If you're selling coffee, make it damn good coffee. Commit to great customer service and encourage your teams to deliver on it. Be unique, stand out. Make your coffee shop a pleasant environment. Commit to ethical trading and doing good in all the ways you can. Be nice to people. Don't dodge your taxes.

The same goes for any business in any industry. Do things right, and don't be afraid to tell people about it if you do.



EMPHASISE YOUR POSITIVES - CONSISTENTLY!

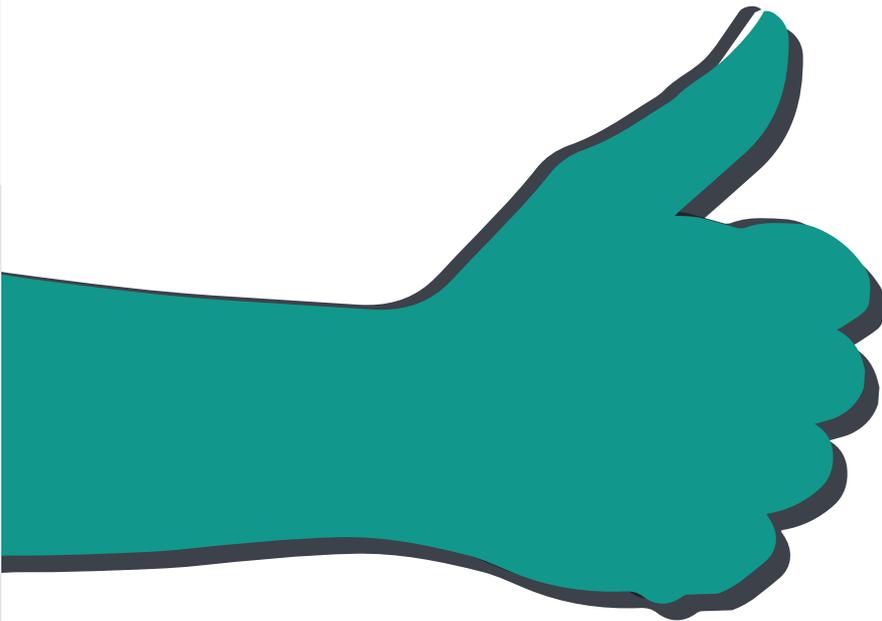
In a world where positive perceptions are created by the masses, it's organisations who commit to doing right, deliver great experiences, create strong brand cultures and show they are going over and above that are building a "positive currency" among their customer base. These companies are winning.

Investing in positive, proactive stories that reflect - authentically - that you run a great company and you are supported by great people isn't just a nice-to-have, it's a must do for any modern organisation.

Deliver it through channels in an integrated way and you can create incredibly powerful connections with your audiences.

Once those connections are established - and your stories are relevant and delivered consistently - people's perceptions won't necessarily be determined by a single story, or a crisis issue if and when it strikes.

But sometimes, despite every effort, a PR crisis will happen and it's how you react and how you handle the situation that will determine external perceptions about your company...and, potentially, its own future.



PREPARING THE RIGHT WAY - IT'S ALL IN THE PLANNING

As with all good risk mitigation and management, it's all about the planning. The saying: "Fail to prepare, prepare to fail" is never more true in a PR crisis.

You can see those who are working from a PR crisis management playbook - like [Richard Branson following the Virgin Trains crash in Cumbria in 2007](#).

In this short interview, Branson spoke positively about his company's track record (he emphasised its positive currency), whilst expressing empathy for passengers (he showed he cared). He took the lead and the responsibility (he showed accountability). And he promised action (and delivered on it subsequently which is a critical - and often missed - step).

He was also candid, contrite, compassionate and committed. More about that later...

So, how should the planning work for anyone serious about reputation management and PR crisis handling?



The following eight-point process is intended to give you the basis on which you can create your own crisis PR management plan.

Alternatively, (*shameless plug alert*) please feel free to come and speak to the team at No Brainer for a free consultation and we'd be happy to try and help put this into context for your own organisation.

8 STEPS

TO MANAGING A PR CRISIS

PRE-CRISIS RISK PROFILING

Anticipate and prioritise all the potential PR crises that could strike, and prepare for them

Get a team of people from across your business to come together to list all the potential crises that could strike your business. Don't forget frontline, customer-facing team members as they can often have much more of a real-life and real-time handle of the common issues and complaints than the CEO or management.

If you're big enough, you may already have scoped some of this as part of your organisational risk management planning.

If you've not gone through this process before, then it's worth the investment in time and effort. It may be another thing for you to focus on, but you'll appreciate it if the time ever comes, heaven forbid!

When doing this, spend time thinking about everything that has the potential to go wrong in your business. It could be supply chain issues, financial impropriety, a rogue employee accessing your social channels...in fact, any physical risks, financial risks, company risks, health and safety risks, market or trading risks that could directly impact you.

Then prioritise each risk, putting the worst case scenarios with most likelihood to happen first.

We colour code our PR/reputational risk strategies (red, amber or green), and then apply a likelihood score (one to five, five being most likely). Then we focus on the red fives first and work our way down.

Once that's done, apply a clear response strategy for each classification. For example, a major issue (a red, five) will require much more resource – in terms of time, people and business prioritisation – than a green one, which may be a common, simple or regular complaint.

Often the lower priority issues can be handled simply by giving people – i.e. your frontline or customer-facing teams – the right O&A documents and the messages and processes to make things right.

Once that's done, think about potential holding responses to each scenario and be clear about the processes you need to put in place if they happen. What should we say if we discover this issue? Does it need a core team convening? Does the Communications or Marketing Director need a seat at the top table of 'Gold Command'? Can it be handled by a simple crisis/key issues response O&A held by the frontline team? You get the gist.



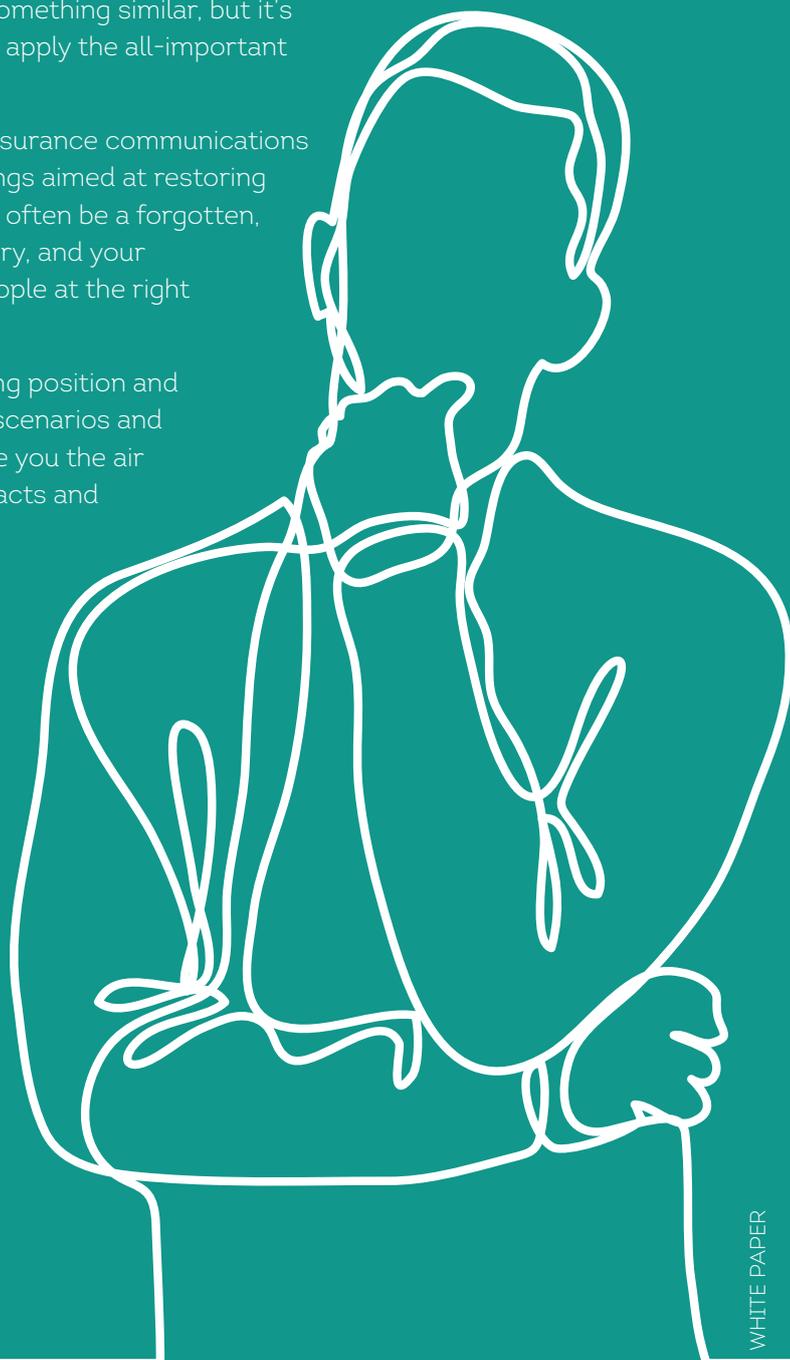
Then make sure you know which audiences will need to be informed and how in each scenario. Identify regulators, partners, staff, customers, suppliers etc. Be clear about the accountabilities and roles of the team to delivering the communications through these channels too (i.e. press office - media, compliance team/lawyer - regulators etc).

A lot of companies have a risk register or something similar, but it's important to make sure you don't forget to apply the all-important communications lens.

The right communications - customer reassurance communications through the channels; business-wide briefings aimed at restoring faith among staff; promises of action - can often be a forgotten, but critical, component of a brand's recovery, and your messages need to be heard by the right people at the right time if something big hits.

All this provides the groundwork to a holding position and pre-prepared Q&As for your key risks and scenarios and - in times of crisis - sometimes this will give you the air to breathe and the time to hunt down the facts and convene the team when something strikes.

Which leads us on to...



IDENTIFY YOUR CRISIS RESPONSE TEAM

Identify the team who will take accountability for the big ticket issues and be crystal clear about their roles & responsibilities

Once you know your potential crisis scenarios and who and how you'll communicate with your audiences, make sure you have a plan in place to convene the right people – good people, including the frontline teams, call centre managers and/or social media handlers. And quickly.

Modern technologies make this simpler than ever and often it doesn't require a round-the-table meeting when a quick Skype or conference call can cover things off.

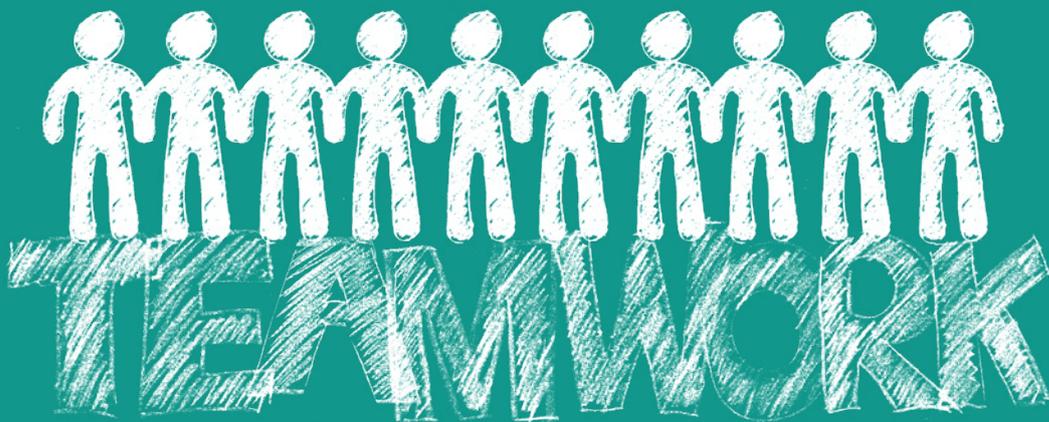
In today's world, social media means time is of the essence for any crisis response team (which is why point one is so important!)...in fact bad news can break on social and that's the first many companies will even know about it. So be quick about it.

And make sure the C-suite or management are giving communications a voice at the top table.

Good counsel at the early stages of a crisis can really help to mitigate a poor situation and shape the subsequent response and actions of a company. And it allows you to tell them to respond quickly too.

And don't just leave your plan on a shelf. As a team, make sure you collectively practice responses and internal protocols to scenarios in your crisis management plan regularly.

That way you can learn to learn to make sure the collective response of your team is a quick one.



KNOW YOUR LANDSCAPE BETTER THAN ANYONE ELSE

Monitor and track everything relating to your company and its competitors in the media and on social

Many companies don't monitor what's appearing about them on social, in the media or online (including reviews), but simple tools and regular monitoring can be an incredibly useful investment.

Tools like **Gorkana**, **Kantar**, **Cision**, **Vuelio** or **Meltwater**, for example, are available at a cost, but they give useful daily snapshots of the good and bad news and reviews relating to you - and your competitors too, which can be interesting!

Services like this can give you a steer on common issues, which you can highlight to your organisation to mitigate before they escalate. And often it can flag breaking issues or crises before anyone else too.

If your marketing budgets are tighter, then there are a few free tools such as **Google Alerts** or **Talkwalker Alerts**, which can be handy to have in place to regularly monitor and review your landscape.

And, aligned to the first two points, if something pops as part of your routine monitoring, escalate it quickly and appropriately and, if necessary, activate the crisis response plan and holding statement(s).



CHOOSE THE RIGHT SPOKESPEOPLE

Identify and train your key voices during a crisis.

As with the Branson/Virgin Trains case earlier in this article, having the right person in the right place, at the right time, saying the right things can do much to quell the firestorm of a crisis.

Get it wrong and it can **backfire spectacularly**.

Believe me, competency at a boardroom table or in front of large numbers of employees means next to nothing when leaders come under the glare and questioning that comes with the intense media scrutiny during a crisis.

It's critical for the right person – or people – to be able to communicate confidently during a crisis, in order to safeguard your company's reputation, the business itself and, if need be, their own position.

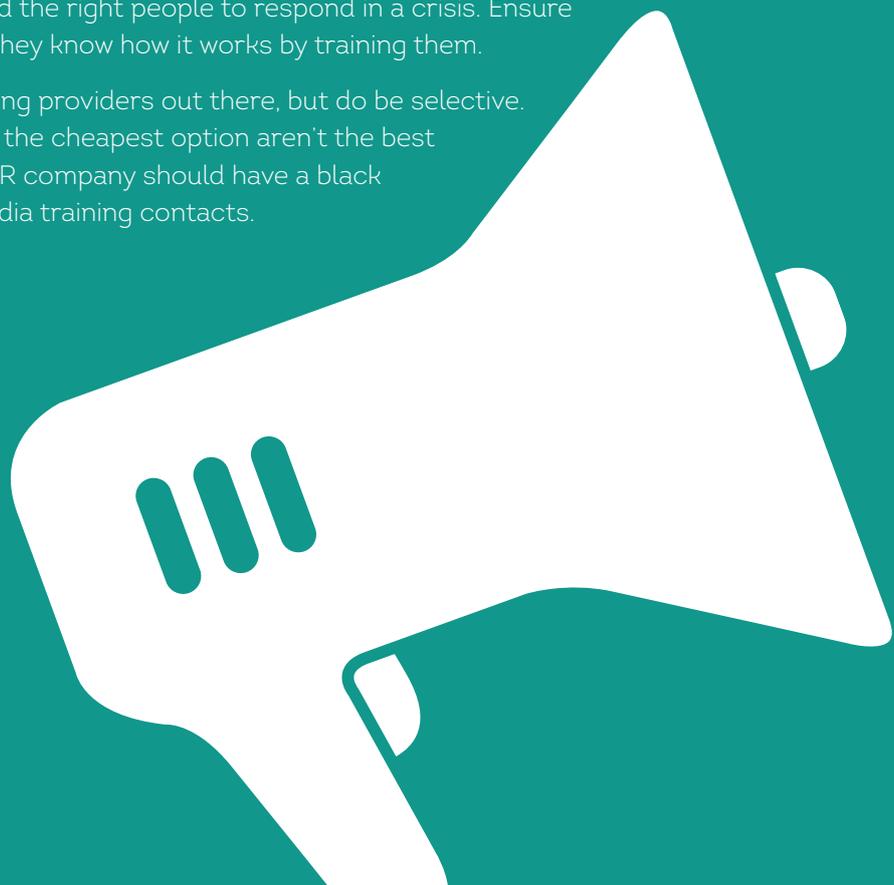
We work with a number to clients to organise realistic journalist-led media training for key people to experience this scrutiny in a safe environment, giving them real-time experiences of rehearsing and delivering key messages, quickly.

Often this is bespoke and focuses on potential reputational hot topics that could directly hit the companies we work alongside.

We work with small teams of people – mainly business leaders – to enable them to learn a range of simple, universal techniques that could help mitigate the impact of bad news and protect their company's reputation in time of crisis.

So, ensure you have identified the right people to respond in a crisis. Ensure they are senior. And ensure they know how it works by training them.

There's plenty of media training providers out there, but do be selective. Often the most expensive or the cheapest option aren't the best options. If in doubt, a good PR company should have a black book packed full of great media training contacts.



IDENTIFY ALL YOUR AUDIENCES AND CHANNELS

Think in an integrated way and deliver consistency of message across the channel mix (internally, externally and socially) – talk to your audiences directly.

At No Brainer we talk about integrated communications all the time. For us, integrated communications – delivered through the **PESO principle** – is a must for any organisation of any size who understand modern communications.

As I've said before, when you deliver great content – compelling stories and messages – through the wide-ranging channels at your disposal you can create incredibly powerful connections with your audiences.

It works for proactive, positive news – the stuff that creates the positive currency with your customers and staff consistently. We know, because we deliver it for our clients and it enables us to hit the KPIs that matter to them (things like increased sales, data capture, brand awareness and product acquisition etc).

But it is also equally important to identify and utilise all these channels to deliver messages during a crisis.

All the preparation you've done in the pre-crisis phase is key here.

If the crisis hits, you'll have prepared a holding position for media and the website. This can quickly be repurposed for social. You can drive the message to staff through internal communications channels, such as email or internal social networks. It works for any channel you have access to.

Use everything you have to reassure anyone impacted you are on top of the situation – as they enable you to connect directly with your audiences without having to go through the 'filter' of a media outlet chasing down the juicy facts of a crisis.

Finally, and critical to this phase, is ensuring that the timings of any responses are coordinated through the channel mix, so you are saying the same things to your audiences.

Get it right and it breeds a consistency to company's voice and messaging – through every channel – during a crisis. And that is half the battle.



GET AHEAD OF THE STORY

If a crisis pops, have faith in your planning, avoid knee-jerk reactions, take responsibility and focus on the facts before honing your messages.

We love this line by Michael Levin of BusinessGhost Inc. who said, in times of crisis...

"Getting ahead of the story is the strategy. Figuring out the finer points of [a crisis response] strategy - do that over the weekend. But start communicating, apologizing, refunding, or whatever-ing now!"

The first phase of any crisis is to ensure the organisation is handling the response to the issue in the right way. Is the refunding, recalling, apologising (I'm reverting to UK English now!), whatever-ing happening? Make sure it is.

As for the communicating and apologising, the preparations and scenario planning you've spent time honing provides a useful starting point to any crisis response.

Have faith in your preparations. But make sure you're adapting it to the situation you face, as we can guarantee it will never be exactly as you'd planned.

Be quick to establish a holding position across your channels – in particular social and with any media enquiries. You need it to give you air to breathe.

But – and this is an important but – only do this once you're crystal clear about the facts on this issue. Ask: What happened? When? Where? How? Who is impacted and who is accountable? Base all your communications in fact, otherwise it will backfire on you.

Monitor the landscape in real time – get your social and media guys all on high alert and reporting regularly to see how the issue is landing, or shifting. And respond quickly to emerging issues, ensuring you're keeping the crisis response team and C-suite involved and engaged in how things are going.

If social is a firestorm, make sure you have the resources and messages (such as a pre-prepared Q&A document) to be able to respond to complaints and queries in real time. If there's a question you've not prepared for or spikes of negativity about something specific, find the answers and share them.

If you see the narrative change, new questions come to light, scrutiny around certain elements of the crisis escalate – then feed it back into the core team and adapt, handling, agree it and respond.

And if you've activated a holding statement in social and with the media, think early about what the key second and third responses could be... and quickly.



BE HUMAN, BE HONEST

Forget spin-doctoring. Be proactive, accountable, candid, contrite, compassionate and committed – keeping it ethical, always.

In times of crisis always tell the truth. Don't try and cover something up. Ultimately, it will only make things worse.

In **Forbes'** "13 Golden Rules of PR Crisis Management", Solomon Timothy of OneIMS says:

"Manage the situation by taking responsibility, reacting immediately, and responding to feedback. Instead of arguing publicly, acknowledge people's concerns and questions and respond to the right conversations."

He's right.

'Transparency' is a word thrown around in these scenarios, but a better approach is to follow the 'Four Cs' identified by **Nirmalya Kumar and Nader Tavassoli**, two marketing academics from London Business School – be candid, contrite, compassionate and committed.

Their research relates to product recalls primarily, but the same rules apply in any PR crisis or with any major reputational issue.

Be candid – If it's a process issue, a flaw in your systems, a product failure or a business failure then admit it. Be honest and open with those who are impacted. But be clear about how you're going to fix it.

Be contrite – Apologise if the need or issue warrants it. A simple "sorry" can go a long way to restore a degree of faith in

a company. Don't try and wriggle out of it or try to spin-doctor your way out. But be clear about how you're going to make sure it doesn't happen again.

Be compassionate – If people are directly impacted by the issue – your people, your customers, your suppliers or others – then show that you care. And mean it. If this means you going over and above to make amends then deliver on it, don't just promise it. But be clear you understand people's frustrations rather than sideline them.

Be committed – Promise action and deliver on it. If your processes have failed, aim to fix them and tell people how you're going to do it. If you're going to investigate, do it. And do it the right way. But make sure you tell people how you've done it and what actions you've taken to remedy things.

At all times, be ethical. As PR practitioners we have a responsibility to act ethically in all we do, and as a company we won't compromise on that. For example, we adhere to the professional charters and codes of conduct of the **CIPR** and the **PRCA** and we'd always encourage others – both agency side and in-house – to follow them too.

It's important to maintain the 4Cs throughout the lifecycle of a PR crisis, but with good planning, the right team, organised processes and a commitment to fixing the problem, there will be light at the end of the tunnel.



LEARN LESSONS EVERY SINGLE TIME

Always commit the time to a post-crisis evaluation, feedback the lessons learned and adapt the plan.

Once the noise has quietened, this is the bit many organisations leave out, but it's often the most important step in the whole process. Why? Because it allows you to review every single step above but with new learnings and through personal experience – good and bad.

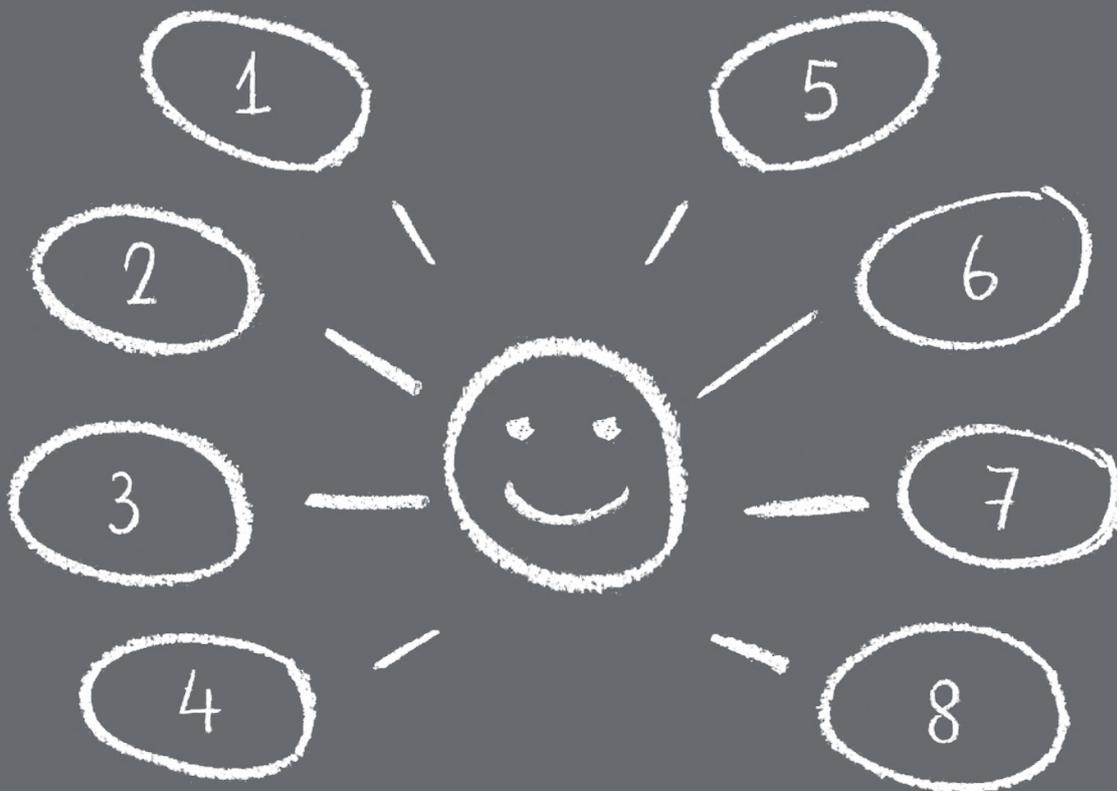
Not everything will go to plan. You'll find that holding statements aren't sufficient, processes in the crisis response plan are missing, an audience may have been forgotten in the melee, or crisis response team members were missed out.

So, convene the team of minds and review everything from top to bottom.

If you don't learn anything from a crisis issue, then you know you're in a good place. You can relax for another day.

But don't forget to keep your eyes and ears peeled for the next potential issue.

As we know it can sometimes be only 280 characters away...





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