

MARKETING

10 questions to help brands prepare for the next crisis

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A large orange rectangular graphic with white text that reads "It's not what you say, it's what they hear.®". The text is centered and uses a bold, sans-serif font. A small white downward-pointing arrow is visible at the bottom center of the orange box.

Message in a battle. Image credit: maslansky + partners

By A LUXURY DAILY COLUMNIST

By [Michael Maslansky](#)

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"Give me six hours to chop down a tree, and I will spend the first four sharpening my axe." Thus said Abraham Lincoln.

Similarly, we have found that the key to successful crisis management is the kind of solid preparation that can turn a negative event into a positive message about your company.

Here are 10 questions to assist you with turning a potential reputational disaster into branding gold:

1. Do you have a repeatable process for crisis communications?

When a crisis hits, are communicators in all of your locations, or across all of your brands or divisions, on the same page and following the same guidelines?

In many cases, the communicator on call is the one responsible for developing the message. In large companies, that often means that you may get not only different responses, but totally different approaches to developing the crisis message.

It is important to put guardrails around your crisis response, so that it will always be consistent. Where are you collecting responses so that they are on hand for the future?

Having a repeatable process and a central message repository will allow you to learn from your best practices and keep a clear message.

In a world where all responses are a Google search away, it is more important than ever to bring a consistent approach.

2. Are you able to look at your company's potential crises from an outsiders' point of view?

Being in crises provokes fear and adrenaline.

It is normal to go into fight, flight or freeze. But to handle the crisis effectively in a way that diffuses negativity and strengthens consumer alliance with your brand, you have to shift your brain out of that mode and get empathetic.

When accusations are made, can you hear them through a lens of understanding and empathy, as opposed to trying to find the weaknesses in their argument?

Are you listening to understand, or are you listening to reply?

If you listen to understand, your response will meet your critics where they are and they will feel seen, heard and respected.

3. Do you have a list of the actions your company can take in a crisis?

It is never enough to respond with generalities. People want to know, specifically, what actions you are going to take.

It is important to have a catalog of actions and policies that highlight your company's commitment to doing the right thing when it comes to product safety, data security, employee and workplace environment, and any other area you could ever be vulnerable to a crisis.

Having this list in advance will ensure that you can respond to any crisis quickly. Any delay may lead the public to believe that you are not taking the situation seriously.

Corrective actions that are already in process, or that you can implement immediately, will convey responsible action to the public.

4. Are you preparing your CEO properly?

Crises are highly emotional, especially for the leader of an organization who often feels that the company's personal reputation has been put at risk. He or she feels like the media is slanting the story against the company and has the natural desire to defend and attack.

Over and over again, we have seen that the best outcomes come from CEOs who are most willing to acknowledge the problem quickly and address it firmly.

Prepare your CEO to avoid the natural tendency to be defensive and instead act with compassion.

Everyone, including your CEO, should refrain from immediately commenting, especially via social media. Be sure that the communications and legal teams vet all responses.

5. Do you have established ground rules for working with legal?

Communicators need to get a message out in the heat of a crisis, but lawyers often have to sign off first. The danger here is that a crisis statement can be too tied to "legalese" and not anchored in the compassion and action that will shift public perception.

Before a crisis hits, establish rules of engagement between communications and legal so that the process is as seamless as possible. A process that enables them to work together is key to handling both reputational and legal risk in the timely manner required.

6. Do you know how to say sorry?

Does your company know how to navigate the art of the apology?

A heartfelt acknowledgement does not have to be an admittance of guilt.

Empathy is the key ingredient, and you need a strong arsenal of ways in which you can convey it.

One of the problems, however, is finding the best way to apologize without saying the actual word "sorry." An outright apology may create a direct tie to liability.

Statements should be prepared in advance which express appropriate levels of regret in various circumstances.

A collection of statements should be prepared and vetted that accomplish the goal of demonstrating responsibility and action.

7. Have you incorporated risk management into your strategy?

Companies have lawyers to manage legal risk, consultants to manage business risk, and accountants to manage financial risk. But who is managing your communication risk?

When it comes to the way that companies respond to a crisis, very little preparation happens at the board level.

Boards should ensure that there is a plan in place to address crisis risk.

8. Are you responding to the real issue the narrative that is underpinning the crisis?

Crises tend to metastasize faster when they tie into a larger narrative about the company, the industry, or business, in general.

If society thought all companies were good, then they would give them the benefit of the doubt. But there is a larger narrative that says, "Big companies don't care about customers."

If you just try and address the surface facts for example, why the ingredient is not at fault, or why isolated employees who have been let go created the issue you are answering the wrong question.

You have to address the underlying narrative to successfully mitigate the crisis.

9. Have you established a voice for your audience?

Is there someone in your organization who can act as the public advocate? Are you that person? What tools do you have at your disposal to effectively listen to the voice of the public and translate that into action?

Many companies have social listening tools to measure volume and sentiment, but where they fall short is actually distilling down the language that has been used to criticize them by the public.

It is in those customer insights in what they are saying that you get a window into how people really feel.

10. Have you defined success?

Define what a truly good outcome is.

What is your ultimate goal when you respond? Strive for that goal, instead of letting the fear of backlash constrain you from creating the best possible response.



Michael Maslansky is CEO of language strategy firm [maslansky + partners](#)

Michael Maslansky is CEO of language strategy firm [maslansky + partners](#), New York. Reach him at mmaslansky@maslansky.com.