

Crisis Communication Strategies Lessons from Major Brands

Ansari Mansoor*

Department of Communication Studies, Hasanuddin University, Makassar 90245, Indonesia

Introduction

In today's fast-paced and highly interconnected world, effective crisis communication is crucial for maintaining a brand's reputation and ensuring business continuity. Crises can arise unexpectedly, and how a company responds can determine its long-term viability. This review article examines crisis communication strategies employed by major brands during significant crises, highlighting key lessons learned and best practices. Crisis communication is defined as the collection, processing, and dissemination of information during a crisis. It is not merely reactive; it involves proactive planning to anticipate potential crises and develop a comprehensive communication strategy. Effective crisis communication aims to protect stakeholders, mitigate damage, and restore trust.

One of the most fundamental lessons in crisis communication is the importance of quick and transparent responses. In times of crisis, public perception can change rapidly, and delays in communication can lead to speculation, rumors, and misinformation. Brands that respond quickly and openly are better able to control the narrative and set the tone for subsequent discussions. When Toyota faced a massive recall in 2009–2010 due to safety concerns about faulty accelerator pedals, its response, while initially delayed, improved over time. Toyota acknowledged the issue, took responsibility, and committed to rectifying the problem, even though their response was slow at first. The company learned that the key to navigating a crisis was to own up to the issue and be transparent with the public. By issuing statements that detailed the issue and how they planned to address it, Toyota managed to rebuild consumer confidence, even though the damage to its reputation was significant [1].

Description

Equally important is the need for consistent messaging across all platforms. A breakdown in messaging can cause confusion, erode trust, and give the impression of a lack of coordination or sincerity. In the case of the BP oil spill in 2010, one of the most infamous corporate crises in recent history, the company's messaging faltered in significant ways. BP's initial public statements were considered tone-deaf, with CEO Tony Hayward's comment that he wanted his "life back" coming across as insensitive to the environmental disaster and the lives affected by the spill. BP's lack of coordinated messaging made matters worse, with different executives offering conflicting statements [2].

Moreover, a brand's authenticity during a crisis plays a pivotal role in its ability to recover. The public is often more willing to forgive mistakes when they believe that a company is genuinely trying to make amends and acting

with integrity. When Johnson & Johnson faced a crisis in 1982 due to the Tylenol poisoning incident, the company's response set a gold standard for crisis management. Seven people died after consuming Tylenol capsules that had been laced with cyanide, leading to a nationwide panic. Johnson & Johnson quickly pulled 31 million bottles of Tylenol from store shelves, despite the enormous financial cost, and launched a nationwide effort to reassure the public that its products were safe. The company's decision to act in the interest of consumer safety, even at the expense of short-term profit, was widely praised, and Johnson & Johnson regained public trust as a result. The company's response demonstrated that authenticity doing the right thing, even when it's difficult is a cornerstone of effective crisis communication.

Crisis communication also demands a deep understanding of the audience, their concerns, and their expectations. Listening to customers and stakeholders is crucial in crafting an effective response. When United Airlines faced a PR disaster in 2017 after forcibly removing a passenger from an overbooked flight, the company's initial response only served to inflame the situation. The viral video of the incident sparked outrage, and United's CEO, Oscar Munoz, initially issued a statement describing the incident as "re-accommodating" the passenger, which seemed dismissive of the real issue at hand. His tone was widely criticized as insufficiently empathetic [3]. It wasn't until United Airlines made a more sincere and direct apology, issued compensation to the affected passenger, and took steps to overhaul its overbooking policies that the company began to recover. United's failure to understand the emotional impact of the incident and their misreading of public sentiment at the outset compounded the crisis. Their eventual success in diffusing the crisis came from acknowledging the emotional gravity of the situation and making tangible changes that would prevent a similar incident from happening again.

Proactively managing a crisis is another critical lesson. Waiting for a crisis to unfold before reacting is a reactive approach that rarely leads to favourable outcomes. Instead, brands must anticipate potential crises and have a crisis communication plan in place before a disaster strikes. A solid crisis management plan involves identifying potential risks, training key personnel, and preparing clear, concise messages that can be adapted quickly in the face of an actual crisis. For instance, when Starbucks faced a backlash in 2018 over the arrest of two Black men at one of its stores, the company was able to quickly implement its crisis response plan. CEO Kevin Johnson publicly apologized, met with the men involved, and announced a company-wide training session on racial bias for all employees. Starbucks's response was well-coordinated, compassionate, and included actionable steps to prevent such incidents in the future.

Another essential aspect of crisis communication is the role of empathy in addressing public concerns. Brands must not only acknowledge the facts of the situation but also demonstrate an understanding of how the crisis impacts individuals emotionally. In 2018, when Facebook was embroiled in a data privacy scandal involving Cambridge Analytica, CEO Mark Zuckerberg's initial response was widely criticized for lacking genuine empathy. His failure to immediately address the public's concerns over privacy and his delayed public apology made the situation worse. Over time, however, Facebook's response evolved [4]. Zuckerberg eventually acknowledged the gravity of the situation, apologized more comprehensively, and outlined a series of steps the company would take to protect user data moving forward. While the damage to Facebook's reputation was significant, the company's eventual recognition of the emotional impact of the breach and its steps to address the issue helped stabilize the situation.

*Address for Correspondence: Ansari Mansoor, Department of Communication Studies, Hasanuddin University, Makassar 90245, Indonesia; E-mail: ansarimansoor@csic.es

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Moreover, brands must remember that crises are often an opportunity to improve. A crisis can serve as a catalyst for change, prompting organizations to reevaluate their policies, practices, and overall business operations. The way a company handles a crisis can often shape its brand perception in the long term. After the 2013 horse meat scandal in Europe, where several major brands were found to be selling products containing horse meat without disclosing it, many companies faced significant backlash. However, some brands turned the crisis into an opportunity to reassert their commitment to quality and transparency. For example, several food companies, including Tesco, adopted more rigorous food sourcing and quality control procedures to reassure consumers about the integrity of their products. By responding thoughtfully to a crisis and making improvements based on the lessons learned, brands can not only mitigate the damage but also position themselves for long-term success [5].

Conclusion

The key to successful crisis communication lies in a combination of quick and transparent responses, consistent and authentic messaging, a deep understanding of audience concerns, proactive planning, empathy, and the willingness to learn from the experience. Major brands that have successfully navigated crises whether it's Toyota, BP, Johnson & Johnson, United Airlines, Starbucks, or Facebook offer valuable lessons in how to turn moments of crisis into opportunities for growth and rebuilding trust. As businesses continue to operate in an increasingly volatile environment, crisis communication will remain an essential skill for leaders, PR teams, and brands seeking to maintain their reputation and sustain long-term success. It wasn't until the company began to address the criticisms head-on, apologize for its missteps, and make visible leadership changes that the situation began to calm down. Communication lesson highlights how digital platforms have revolutionized the speed and scale at which crises unfold, and how brands must be prepared to react swiftly and transparently in this new environment.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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