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CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS, EVENTS

Brand Crises and How to Respond

By Nancy Lazarus on January 21, 2011 1:18 PM



Photo (l-r: Kirk Stewart, Erich Joachimsthaler, Randall Ringer, Jenny Dervin)

“Brand crises can now happen in unexpected places,” observed **Randall Ringer**, managing partner and co-founder of Verse Group. He moderated an AMA/American Marketing Association panel about preventing and reversing brand crises on Thursday in New York.

Panelists included **Kirk Stewart**, executive vice president at APCO Worldwide; **Jenny Dervin**, director of corporate communications at JetBlue Airways; and **Erich Joachimsthaler**, founder and managing partner at Vivaldi Partners.

They all agreed that these days it is not a matter of whether a brand crisis may happen, but when. The “unexpected” places can also include customer critiques on Twitter along with negative media reactions to [brand logo changes](#).

Stewart outlined ten principles of brand crisis management and noted, “These may seem obvious, but companies often lose sight of simple rules when they are under attack.” He used BP as an example of what not to do.

Dervin also discussed JetBlue’s well-documented crises in the past few years, including the February 2007 snowstorm that stranded passengers on the runways and the **Steven Slater** flight attendant incident [last August](#). She described how the company responded and rebounded in each case.

Speak with one voice and pick the right spokesperson. Stewart noted the fiasco that occurred with BP and its CEO Tony Heyward, who was clearly not the best choice to speak for the company.

Tone and volume matter. Choose your language carefully to avoid self-inflicted wounds. BP also provides an example of how not to respond, when Heyward said he “wanted his life back.”

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Be fast but accurate, since as Stewart noted, “There are now “a million paparazzi with camera phones.”

Dervin said, “There used to be twenty golden minutes to get our act together during a crisis, but now it only takes nine minutes for a crisis to start on Twitter.” When the Steven Slater incident occurred, she said it took six hours for JetBlue to unravel his story as they interviewed all the passengers. One and a half days later JetBlue posted a reaction on their company blog.

Take responsibility for what happened. Be humble and not defensive. After the 2007 snowstorm, JetBlue’s CEO recorded a video message and sent an apology letter to all of its customers. Dervin noted, “Customers want an explanation, and they can sense authenticity.”

Stay close to your customers and provide reassurance using all available tools. During a more recent ice storm last February, JetBlue informed customers of the perils of air travel during an ice storm on its company blog as a way of explaining why they had to cancel flights.

Rally your core. Inform your employees and create brand ambassadors. Dervin reported that JetBlue now has 17 employees who informally monitor the company’s mentions on Twitter, and some are authorized to speak on the company’s behalf.

Live your values and meet or exceed brand expectations. Dervin noted that JetBlue had built up a reserve of goodwill among its customers that helped it through these crises.

Be transparent and accountable given the 24/7 news environment. JetBlue also used the 2007 snowstorm crisis to announce a customer bill of rights to take responsibility for its actions and avoid similar occurrences in the future.

See the crisis as an opportunity. Companies that handle crises well can end up in a stronger position. Dervin reported that as a result of the February 2007 snowstorm, the company did not experience any revenue decline.

Anticipate and prepare by monitoring and scanning all channels. Dervin said JetBlue tries to monitor everything, and Twitter serves as their “early warning system for mentions that are outside the norms.” She said the key for JetBlue is to “assess the vulnerability to the brand, then own it, fix it and get on with it.”

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