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TIMELINESS - THE KEY TO EFFECTIVE CRISIS MANAGEMENT

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Introduction: Crisis communications case studies from across the world underscore how timely response to crisis has helped brands/companies win half the battle and emerge with reputations intact. The opposite, has led to catastrophic reputational damage. Rapid evolution of technology, ever changing consumer expectations, 24x7 media have made it imperative for communication managers to remain on their toes as also the need to plan for a crisis beforehand. Having crisis communications SOPs in place, for managing internal and external communications, is also critical. This brief review paper attempts to understand the importance and impact of timeliness in crisis management through a few case studies researched earlier. A brief summary of the crisis, ensuing management response and result, is discussed in the forthcoming sections. The paper ends by summing up key takeaways from these case studies and suggestions on how to improve timeliness of crisis response that can be researched further.

Case Study: The Boeing Max 737 crisis (2019)

Brief summary – In 2019, Boeing's celebrated passenger aircrafts Max 737 were grounded the world over after two tragic air crashes, in a span of five months. Investigations revealed a malfunctioning anti-stall system – MCAS, a software component present in all Boeing Max 737s, as the cause of the fatal air accidents. The revelation, subsequently led to most countries' aviation authorities disallowing the airplanes to fly.

Crisis response by the management– Boeing's inordinate delay in responding to the situation compounded the situation. Additionally, instead of proactively taking responsibility, voluntarily grounding the planes, calming rising public concerns about Boeing's flight safety standards through concerted communication efforts, the

company resorted to studied silence. The crisis eventually cost the airplane manufacturer, billions of dollars in losses and an unused inventory of more than four hundred new planes and tarnished perception. Articles published in public relations journals point out how not acting in a timely manner to communicate its response, damaged Boeing's impeccable image of unmatched safety standards.

Case study: Nestlé India's Maggi crisis (2014)

Brief Summary – In the year 2014, Nestlé's popular instant noodles brand 'Maggi' ran into trouble after multiple samples of the product showed higher than permissible quantities of lead and MSGs. The company was also accused of misleading consumers by adding 'No added MSGs' label on Maggi packets. The crisis saw Maggi being banned by FSSAI, record loss of money and market share.

Crisis response by the management– The brand delayed response, was not forthcoming with information required to address the issue and consumers' concerns thereby losing precious time. It did not take responsibility for its actions, thereby amplifying a lack of transparency. The crisis corroded Maggi's spotless image of being India's most preferred brand. News articles and research papers highlighted the initial lack of timeliness and transparency in the brand's crisis communication plan which led to loss of reputation and consumer brand loyalty.

Case study: Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill incident (year 2010)

A blast in Deepwater Horizon Oil rig owned by BP Plc. led to loss of lives and an oil spill of enormous proportions leading to an environmental disaster. Oil and methane gas continuously leaked from an uncapped well one mile under the ocean waters. The spill destroyed marine life and ecology surrounding the area. It also had a major impact on the livelihood of communities dependent on the ocean.

Crisis response by the management– The management at BP was slow in responding to the crisis and took more than three days to ascertain the cause of the disaster. The top management of the company delayed responding to media, stakeholders, as also resorting to not address public concerns in a timely manner. It also failed to reach out to comfort the victims and tender an apology which led to BP being perceived as a company which was arrogant and lacked empathy. This resulted in calls for boycott of BP from across the world tarnishing its brand image as corroborated by research studies done on the case.

Case Study: Facebook's - Cambridge Analytica data scandal (2018)

The crisis entails social media giant Facebook getting embroiled in a data privacy scandal pertaining to a political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica managing to collect personal data of more than 80 million Facebook users without their consent. The data was used for political advertising. The scandal caused a huge public uproar and jeopardized Facebook's perception including its market capitalization.

Crisis response by the management –Mark Zuckerberg, the founder and CEO of Facebook did not address the crisis head-on and the firm delayed responding to questions by media and the users alike. The loss of time in acknowledging the data breach, putting up with questions of protecting users' personal data cost the brand

dearly in terms of perception and erosion of its brand credibility. Research studies and published news articles have also highlighted Facebook's lack of transparency and falling short on providing timely response to the crisis which negatively impacted Facebook's perception.

Conclusion:

These case studies, which have also been researched upon and published in journals, news magazines, portals etc. underscore how crucial timeliness is, to crisis communications and crisis management. These cases show the need for brands, managers, companies to respond and communicate with stakeholders immediately. Time is of the essence when managing a crisis. Not only does it help bridge the communication gap that builds up as the company braces to tackle the crisis, but it also cements brand loyalty among the internal and external publics. Not wasting time to admit a shortfall and being honest about all aspects of the crisis with the stakeholders can go a long way in promoting goodwill and positive perception, which eventually help any brand to tide over the crisis. It is disastrous for managements to delay responding in a timely manner during a crisis, because they unwittingly give away their power to control the narrative, leaving it to external parties for commenting and speculation, thus deepening the crisis.

The research done so far on this subject suggests keeping communication channels open and countering misinformation through fact based response. It also highlights cases where timely communications from brand managers or management of a company has helped mitigate the damage done by a crisis.

As a suggestion, additional research could be undertaken on the importance of having a crisis preparedness audit by companies/brands every month, role of social media listening tools in helping predict any crisis before hand and charting up plans to tackle the same. Another aspect that could be researched upon is effectiveness of communication training imparted to top and mid level management as well as the role of a brand/company's internal publics in helping respond to crisis in a timely fashion.

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