



## ASK THE EXPERT

# How to Manage a PR Crisis

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“Every crisis represents a problem, but it also represents an opportunity to show what you’re made of and to show the values of your organization,” says Argenti, a pioneer in the field of corporate communications. Unfortunately, leaders often miss these opportunities: L.A. Clippers owner Donald Sterling, Target’s CEO Gregg Steinhafel and Mary Barra of General Motors are among the latest candidates for Argenti’s annual list of PR disasters. The problem, he believes, is that many top executives were never trained in crisis management. “Avoiding a crisis in the first place,” he says, “is the best thing you can do.” If a crisis can’t be prevented, Argenti provides the following playbook he says “every leader should have ready for when it hits the fan.”

## COMMUNICATE

“The first thing to do is admit you made a mistake and apologize. While this may drive your lawyers crazy, it will build tremendous goodwill in the court of public opinion. Communicate directly with affected constituents. The greatest criticism corporations face is that they react too slowly. Social media has tipped the ante on the timing—people are expecting you to get it together within a matter of hours or even to have an answer on the spot. The idea that you tell it all and tell it fast is the key rule to live by.”

## TAKE CONTROL

“Define the problem and figure out what you’re trying to accomplish. People expect you to know what’s going on and to have all of the information. That can take a long time. In the early days of a crisis, typically you’re in the dark on about 90 percent of the information. You have to figure out both the technical side of the crisis and interview people to get to the bottom of what’s going on. Set up a centralized communications center. You want all the information to be controlled out of one place.”

## WORK WITH MEDIA

“The media wants to tell a good story with victims, villains and visuals. You can’t be at your worst when they’re at their best. You need to be able to tell your side of the story most efficiently and most eloquently through the media, or someone else will do it for you. Realize that they have deadlines and they’re trying to be a conduit to people upset about the crisis. If you keep them informed as much as you can and make them a partner rather than an obstacle, you’re probably going to be more successful.”

## CARRY ON

“Remember that the business has to continue. To the managers involved the crisis will most certainly be up-permost in their minds. To others the business must go on despite the crisis. In addition to finding suitable replacements ahead of time for those who are on the crisis team, managers must try to anticipate the effects of the crisis on other parts of the business. These and other questions related to the ongoing business need to be thought through by managers on and off the crisis team as soon as possible.”