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Crisis management and the four pillars of communication

By Solomon Carter

This may sound astonishingly euphemistic and even naïve, but it amazes me to see the number of brands that need crisis management when there are so many blueprints for exactly what not to say or do. These observations are further exacerbated when the response to a crisis causes an even greater issue than the original nightmare. Organizations pay so many important people a lot of money to lead them in effective communications, yet we still see the feverish cadence of these failures continue.

I used the word “blueprint,” but perhaps I’m wrong. Maybe there isn’t a mother of all blueprints out there that speaks directly to the dos and don’ts of communication and crisis management, and the resources aren’t as accessible as I think. These Groundhog Day events can’t just be happening everywhere organically, can they? My experience tells me that so many iconic brands repeating the same errors locally and internationally can’t all be conspiring to harm themselves the same way. This led me to write this piece because I see a tremendous educational growth opportunity for our risk, leadership, and communications/marketing teams; I want to see them succeed like never before.

The PIERCE Model’s pillars of communication

The four pillars of communication (Figure 1) are derived from what is called the PIERCE™ Model, which stands for the Performance Improvement, Ethics Risk, and Communication Enhancement Model.^[1] It provides four pillars that should serve as the foundation in all communications pre- and post-risk mitigation. Meaning, before the crisis happens and when you’re in crisis management mode, all the basic and advanced steps you take in the process are the same. As a missionary who travels out of the country, it reminds me of malaria medicine. You take it to prevent getting malaria, but if you fail to take it and get malaria? The prophylaxis you should have taken to avoid it is the same medicine you take to treat it. There’s no prescriptive difference.

Figure 1: The four pillars of communication

Effective Communication

Let's accentuate the very beginning of what's required!



TRUTHFUL



CORRECT AND
ACCURATE



TIMELY



RESPONSIBLE

The PIERCE™ Model

The first pillar

The first pillar is to be truthful. Steven Covey said that “we operate at the speed of trust,” and it’s true!^[2] Simply put: if you have a reputation for not telling the truth, then people—whether your employees or external stakeholders—won’t trust you. And if they don’t trust you, then they won’t respect you. And if they don’t respect you, they won’t want anything to do with you. Being truthful and authentic in how and what you communicate is hypercritical to developing trust for your organization and establishes you as honest and reliable. There is a direct correlation between brand reliability and financial success. Things like being predictably truthful, telling good stories frequently, telling them first, and getting ahead of the curve when there’s less-than-flattering news are a part of the secret recipe. Fully understanding these standards and their subtleties is the difference between insulating your brand from legal liability and risk or causing your firm to operate outside its risk tolerance.

So, to be clear, this pillar instructs us to be authentic and truthful in our original communications. And then, if we are confronted with a crisis, it further informs us to be truthful when mitigating that crisis. And therein lies the issue. It’s perplexing to see how many organizations’ first inclination is not to tell the truth when mitigating a crisis. They are what I call “emergency liars.” They lie to fit the narrative of the emergency they’re currently experiencing to make the pain go away. In actuality, it will make the matter worse downstream. Sooner or later, the truth comes out, and they’ll have to go through all kinds of painful gyrations until they finally wind up admitting the truth, which they should have done from the beginning. Many times, they will doggedly refuse to ever be truthful, thus allowing the brand to be viewed as poorly structured and led, lacking accountability, lacking courage, and insulting the intelligence of every sentient being capable of detecting that they’re being blatantly lied to—all things that decimate a brand’s reputation and financial health, especially in America!

Every single organizational communication must have the foundational standard of “Are we being authentic and telling the complete truth here?” before it goes out the door. And I emphasize the word “complete” because lying

by omission is another doozy that will do your brand no favors. Anything less invites risk and causes your brand to operate outside its risk tolerance.

To be crystal clear: the nexus between lying and a nuclear-level brand-damaging event is powerful. Whether you're communicating about the latest employee baking contest in the parking lot or engaging in a crisis-management communication of ginormous proportions, *the standard of truthfulness doesn't waiver.*

The second pillar

The second pillar is to be correct and accurate. This one is short and sweet. Not being correct and accurate is like not being truthful, but doesn't necessarily denote the same nefarious nature of flat-out lying—though it provides similar outcomes. By not being precise in what you're communicating, it degrades trust, authenticity, and a sense of reliability and security. It can also make you seem less than astute, and I wouldn't want that for you. Paying attention to the details, facts, and figures of your communication always counts.

The third pillar

The third pillar is to be timely in what you communicate. It can be something as simple as failing to issue a press release that leverages the goodwill of something your brand did within a couple days of the occurrence. Being untimely in that example could diminish the brand's positive press and financial performance because your team was lethargic in getting the good news out. Or it may mean a failure to tell your customers and stakeholders about something that could cause harm. Being untimely is a prolific trust degrader. When the world asks, "Why didn't you warn us sooner?" and an executive at the podium repeatedly says, "Clearly we dropped the ball," it's an unacceptable answer and doesn't denote the heightened accountability posture they think. We already know you dropped the ball! It reeks of incompetence and questionable judgment in leadership; it hints that someone was more afraid of looking bad—protecting the brand—than protecting the people the brand depends on to survive. It may even denote a lack of humanity as well.

As it relates to timeliness, one of the key characteristics of an outstanding communications apparatus is a nimble team that moves quickly without hesitation when needed (morning, noon, or night) and can eloquently say whatever needs to be said with integrity, whether it's good news or bad. Being truthful and authentic helps to achieve that.

The fourth pillar

The fourth and final pillar is being responsible in your communications. I know of a case in a healthcare office setting at the beginning of the pandemic with a serious COVID-19 exposure on one of the floors. A team member came down with a bad case of COVID-19 after not feeling well for a couple of days while at work. She "thought it was something else." The organization sent out a memo saying they were doing a deep clean of the office as a general precautionary measure. They made it seem like it was a random goodwill gesture when it wasn't. Everyone was gently asked to take off a couple of days and then come back to work. The end. They were afraid to admit that someone had COVID-19 and didn't want to "scare" everyone, which was utterly ridiculous.

There was also a strong element of, "We don't like people working from home and want them back in the office working as soon as possible." Needless to say, someone came in anyway, got sick, and then the real reason came out for the "precautionary cleaning." Had the second employee known, they would have never come into the office in the first place. The employee rightfully blamed the organization, and then it went downhill from there. Now they have two publicly known exposures for the price of one—and potential added liability.

Everyone found out that the leadership team lied. It degraded trust, which degrades employee engagement,

morale, performance—the list goes on and on. In the end, the truth came out, their lack of integrity was exposed, and no one was disciplined for lying—in an organization where staff is written up for things like being five minutes late—which then caused a whole different set of issues surrounding accountability and fairness. And, last but not least, now everyone works from home as if they'd been doing it for the last 50 years anyway!

By understanding the pillars of being truthful, accurate, and responsible, they would have known to simply say there was an unfortunate COVID-19 exposure and ask everyone to take off a certain number of days, and that would have been that. Also, the deep cleaning didn't happen as quickly as it should have, which speaks to timeliness too. It was the perfect example of doing the opposite of all four pillars—like so many examples of poor crisis communications management and general communications often are.

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