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[A View from Here](#) > [Uncategorized](#) > BP = BAD PRESS

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Posted by Wanda Kenton Smith on July 14, 2010

I recently wrote a marketing column in Trade Only about the need for marine businesses to have crisis communications strategies. I referenced the Tiger Woods debacle and compared it to David Letterman and discussed how a well-orchestrated, pre-emptive strike paid off for the king of late night, while Wood's lingering failure to address his public and control the message at the outset quickly exacerbated his nightmare to epic crisis proportions.

In that same column, I shared a few case studies of how two different marine companies dealt with their own PR challenges. One was proactive and reached out to all of its various audiences, including dealers, customers, prospects and press. The other hid behind its legal eagles and refused to comment or address allegations, to its ultimate detriment. The company suffered resulting brand reputation damage, unhealthy media speculation, loss of dealer confidence, and a direct bullet to the bottom line.

Over the past 85 days I have been reminded of this column as the oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico continues to unfold. Notwithstanding the horrendous environmental implications and massive loss of wildlife and jobs caused by this wretched disaster, I have watched in disbelief as global giant BP has transformed itself into an oily monster, not only because of the spill but also because of its appalling lack of sound public relations.

In short order, BP CEO Tony Hayward became America's public enemy No. 1 with his multiple series of regrettably stupid and embarrassing PR gaffes that delivered prime time and front page fodder on a daily basis.

To wit:

"What the hell did we do to deserve this?" he allegedly said to his executive team, following the spill, reported by the New York Times April 29. I might ask the same question of him as it relates to our coast, our people and our livelihood.

And to The Guardian: "The Gulf of Mexico is a very big ocean. The amount of volume of oil and dispersant we are putting into it is tiny in relation to the total water volume." In a later interview with reporters, he described the environmental impact to be "very, very modest," when in fact it has since been described as one of the worst disasters in modern history.

When asked if he could sleep at night, his flippant response: "Of course I can."

While others were trying to pick up the pieces of their lives, not to mention the tar balls that have changed the complexion and smell of our beaches, Hayward traipsed off to watch — of all things — a yacht race!

And who could forget the verbal bomb he dropped about the scores of "small people" impacted by the spill, including the tragic boat captain who took his own life?

Perhaps his most contemptible blunder was when he tried to make a public apology but in the same breath, added, “There’s no one who wants this over more than I do. I would like my life back.” What a thoughtless, insensitive jerk. No longer the objective media observer, I was fueled by anger and seethed at this highly offensive remark.

I’m thankful that a cap is finally in place, and I pray it will stop the flow of oil. However, BP’s bloody gush of its own bad press will live on in infamy. No doubt, this incident will serve as a major case study of what not to do in PR textbooks for years to come.

There is much we can and should learn from this public relations disaster.

1. Having a crisis communication plan in place is a necessary and prudent business protocol. You never know when some tragic incident can make your company front-page news. Are you prepared?
2. The CEO may be a great leader but may not be the best face or voice to represent the company in a crisis. The company should have a designated spokesperson, and that individual should be groomed and trained to deal with the media. This is a learned skill that embraces not only the spoken word but also intonation and non-verbal body language.
3. Be pre-emptive. Don’t be put on the defensive. Be the first to address the issue. Take responsibility. Tell what transpired, how the company is addressing the problem, and how you will prevent it from happening again. Be proactive. Embrace the role of problem-solver.
4. In crisis situations, it is important to be perceived as caring, concerned and especially sensitive to those whose lives are directly affected. It may be more important to listen than to defend, rationalize or attempt to diminish the scope or impact of the issue. Why was Hayward walking around the beach with his jacket on instead of rolling up his sleeves and working to cleanse wildlife drenched and dying in oil, or meeting with the families whose livelihoods — or lives — were lost?
5. Companies need to be accountable and accept responsibility. I appreciate the fine line between legally protecting assets and opening up your company to lawsuits. However, never forget that failure to openly acknowledge the issue often translates into denying responsibility. Company execs, PR strategists and attorneys should collaborate.

So what are your observations? Agree or disagree? Suggestions or additional insight?

Wanda Kenton Smith is president of Orlando, Fla.-based [Kenton Smith Marketing](#) and president of [Marine Marketers America](#).

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Comments

7 comments on “BP = BAD PRESS”

1. [Megan Soule](#) [July 14, 2010 at 2:36 pm](#)

Well said, Wanda! With you at the helm, we might be holding BP up as an example of responsibility instead of villainy. His callousness sharpens this in my eyes from “accident” to “crime.”

2. [Norm Schultz](#) [July 14, 2010 at 5:04 pm](#)

Once again, Wanda, you are right on target. I well remember your column urging all marine businesses to have a crisis communications plan. It was wise counsel then and it’s so right now! I encourage anyone who missed that column to go back and find it. Meanwhile, your point #5 really seems to resonate with me in these times. In the BP case, there are allegations that corners were cut, standards were not met and safety was ignored on the deepwater Horizon rig. It makes me wonder what has happened to corporate responsibility these days. Have we gotten totally out of balance? Is it a shock that surveys reveal the public no longer trusts businesses? Have we moved from a time in America when there was genuine corporate concern for the community at large to a mindset that any means is acceptable so long as it leads to profit and shareholder equity? Now, I am all for profit and equity growth and our free enterprise system. But, surely that can all be achieved while a business takes the high road and demands a corporate culture of always doing what’s required and proper throughout its ranks. Still, whether you’re a giant like BP or a small boat dealer on an inland lake, you can strive to do everything well and to-the-letter (obviously not in BP’s case) and something can always go wrong. Accordingly, it is a wise leader who recognizes in advance that a crisis communication plan should be in place, just in case. And, as in all your writings, your advice on marketing and communications matters is sound guidance for those who see its value and run with it. Thank you!

3. [Carl M](#) [July 14, 2010 at 5:23 pm](#)

In 2 years all will be forgotten. Just look how the lights have already dimmed on this... This is the first time in a month Haywards name has been mentioned any where . Yes there is oil & tar balls coming ashore in places but not in the volumes that were being painted 2-3 months ago. The self appointed man in charge ,the POTUS, has not been back for a photo op in weeks and has hampered rather than empowered people to action. In fact those birds you speak of – they are off limits to all people- It is a federal felony to go touch those birds if you do not hold the proper Federal government approved documents- even the locals have been told not to touch the birds or wildlife or they are subject to arrest. This same guy POTUS ordered NASA to assist Toyota in their acelloration problem. Today they came out and announced their findings. Guess what -It’s the customers fault for stepping on the gas & not the brakes.. or so the report says.. BP has said from beginning said they were responsible & would pay. How much more did you want them to do?? Is this a disaster ? YES, but it is time for action not crusification.

In less than 3 weeks the secondary drill will get to its mark, which was the predicted time frame from the beginning to resolve the containment of the runaway well. But that was unacceptable to everyone.

Just because something may sound insensitive doesn’t mean it isn’t true. It seems to me more & more we are unable to handle the truth & prefer

to call those saying the truth insensitive, Oh yea BP stock is up since they announced a joint venture to drill off China & signed a deal with the Egyptians to drill off their coast with the first drilling rig now leaving the gulf due to POTUS's moratorium never to return. Hey look at the marine industry, hasn't it been forgotten how some well know leading manufacturers just up & screwed suppliers & dealers but those same folks are back selling similar boats with the same zeal without any repercussions?? Yes they are!!!! We are a forgetful species are we not?

4. [Jody: July 14, 2010 at 8:57 pm](#)

Wanda, great article. But "...it is important to be perceived as caring, concerned and especially sensitive..." didn't quite sit well with me. It shouldn't be perceived, it should be reality. A good ad campaign or spokesperson can give the perception that a company cares and is concerned when they're really not. That can end up backfiring if it is not genuine. e.g. BP's ridiculous ad campaign with supposedly caring and concerned BP employees. You need to really BE caring and concerned, not just try to give the perception that you are.

Norm, I agree wholeheartedly about a company always doing what's required and proper throughout its ranks. A wrong move by one employee can undermine the best intentions.

Are we so far gone as a society that the simple Golden Rule, "Treat others as you would like to be treated," is too hard to follow? So many people are too busy trying to place blame somewhere else, trying to make a fast buck rather than earning it, etc.

We've gone from a society of human beings with human faults, who can be clumsy or make mistakes, and take responsibility for their actions, to a bunch of sue-happy, blame-happy, whiney immature people who take little if any responsibility for their own actions. Don't get me wrong, BP owes the people whose lives they've destroyed. But when a woman can sue and win because she spilled hot coffee on herself, what are these jury members and others like them telling our citizens? It's time people like this WAKE UP AND TAKE RESPONSIBILITY.

It reminds me of when I was a child, and my parents always told me to be honest, that the lie is usually worse than whatever I did. They were right, and because they taught me to be a responsible person and treat others with respect, my business has prospered and grown in the past three years while many have struggled or failed. Reputation means everything to me, because I was raised that way. If you are a good person, bad things may still happen, but it's how you deal with them.

I wonder if the newer generation of parents have figured out that those of us in our late-40's and older grew up knowing that there were consequences to our actions, both good and bad. I'm generalizing a bit here, but who decided that the younger generation would be better off and "feel good about themselves" by not having punishments to fit the act, and simply being allowed to "learn on their own?" They were taught that the world owes them whatever they want whenever they want it by having tantrums to get their way and parents giving in to every whimper.

And no, Johnny can't be on the Varsity Team, because he's just not good enough. Teach him that everyone has their assets and to build on those. Let's get back to letting kids threaten to hold their breath when they don't get their way and see how far it gets them. Quit putting kids on pills for their behavior, teach them they're responsible for their own actions. Then maybe we'll end up with adults who take responsibility without having to be told by 3 lawyers and 4 public relations consultants how to say "It was my fault, I'm sorry, and I'll make it right."

This always has worked for me!

5. [Wanda Kenton Smith: July 15, 2010 at 9:49 pm](#)

Good comments and feedback all. Yes, Carl, we are a forgiving society but in this situation, I do believe BP's reputation has been tarnished. Will people still buy product from them in the future? Probably. But they will never have the same brand equity they had before ... particularly among those of us who live in Florida and the Gulf Coast. Jody, you are right on about the real vs. perceived issue ... of course being truly caring and concerned should be real and should be reflected as such ... however, there are some executives who might in fact BE caring and concerned, but their ability to communicate it suffers in the translation. So they need to make sure it properly translates through verbal and intonation and body language. Also - one correction - the comment about the "small people" is actually attributed to the chairman and not Hayward ... both top execs who clearly need a course in communications. Had there not been so many blunders and bombs, you could easily chalk it up to language barriers, but no slack was cut because of the wave of insensitive remarks that had already rolled off Mr. Hayward's tongue.

6. [Sunshine State: July 29, 2010 at 12:59 pm](#)

If the marine industry and the marine environment that supports us is lucky the BP reality will rise above crafty public relations efforts.

7. [arch: August 31, 2010 at 12:22 pm](#)

Well....here we are a month or two later and guess what? HAYWARD and RUSH LIMBAUGH WERE RIGHT!
Listen, I don't care for either one of those guys. In Hayward's case, if it is proven that BP cut corners, broke drilling laws, etc....(and I'm quite sure they did) then they should be fined and penalized to the fullest extent of the law.

But from the get go, they said the environment damage would be minimal, and we are hearing more and more everyday that is true based on most recent testing.

I'm not trying to minimize the devastation of this spill and the impact on the environment and the local business community, but let's keep it in perspective and have some HONEST DIALOGUE here.

Heyward is a moron for saying those things. But it's not uncommon for ARROGANT CEO's and POLITICIANS to have a loose mouth.

The radical environmentalists and LIBERALS/PROGRESSIVES are absolutely devastated that the environment damage done by this oil spill is turning out to be much less than originally anticipated. They needed a catastrophe to push their agenda (anti-oil, cap and trade bill, etc etc).

Sorry, but that is a fact.

The far left in this country as far more of a threat than Tony Hayward is.

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