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FOCUS CRISIS MANAGEMENT



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The Carnival Triumph became a major media story when it caught fire off the coast of Mexico. The blaze left the vessel listing to one side, drifting in Gulf of Mexico currents and the more than 4,200 passengers and crew on board in limbo. Without air conditioning and running water, some took to sleeping on deck. It took five days for the ship to dock at the Alabama Cruise Terminal.

► Recovery from any crisis is a slow and difficult process of rebuilding trust with words and deeds.

EXPERT CORNER

Recovery at Sea

What Carnival Cruise Line's disaster has to teach businesses

By Andrea Obston

Since the docking of Carnival Cruise Line's Triumph, the conversation has shifted from "ain't it awful?" to the sinking of the company. And, while #cruisefromhell is no longer trending and viewership of the cruise director skit from SNL is down, Carnival Bashing has definitely become a popular parlor game. We're not going to do that here. In fact, I'd like to advance the idea that business people can learn more from what Carnival did right, than what they did wrong.

Hopefully, none of us will need to deal with a calamity of this magnitude, but there are things we can take from this incident:



Andrea Obston

Keep your stakeholders informed early and often

Here, Carnival got 50 percent of the equation right. They did, indeed mobilize all media, both traditional and contemporary, to tell their story. But it kicked in later than a 140-character world would like. By the time Carnival CEO President Gerry Hill made his first statement on Feb. 12, the ship had been disabled for two days and its condition widely reported in the media.

Once Carnival's efforts did kick-in, though, they were timely and productive. Carnival Cruises' crisis team created a dedicated page on the Carnival website for news updates. They also mobilized web-based media with consistent updates via Facebook and Twitter. Throughout the crisis, Carnival's social media team posted 20 updates to their Facebook page. (By the way, that page already had more than two million likes, illustrating the need for companies to have their social media programs firmly in place before a crisis.)

In addition, Carnival used two Twitter feeds (@CarnivalCruise and @CarnivalPR) to issue updates. Those updates included "news you can use" as well as tweet that shined a positive light on what they were doing to keep people informed. Here's an example: "We've

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taken more than 7,000 calls from family & friends & have been in regular contact with our guests' designated on-shore contacts."

One caution here: early on in the crisis, Carnival's Facebook updates were repetitive, covering the same details over and over. Most likely, there wasn't much to add to the story at that time, so I would have advised skipping those repetitive posts. Since Facebook updates are right next to each other, repeating yourself looks like you're more interested in just saying something than saying something that adds to the conversation. That looks a bit disingenuous. I'd rather see updates that are just that — new information.

Issue and support informative, apologetic and compassionate press releases

Your first message in any crisis needs to be a show of compassion and concern to for those affected. Carnival's first release did just that. And it was bolstered by the fact that it appeared to come directly from CEO Hill. It reviewed the facts as they knew them, explained that their safety systems kicked in to contain the fire and made sure to say there were no immediate injuries. Then, it explained what Carnival was doing to bring the ship into a port, outlined what compensation the passengers would be getting, and concluded with: "We're terribly sorry for the inconvenience, discomfort, and frustration our guests are feeling. We know they expected a fantastic vacation, and clearly that is not what they received. Our shipboard and shore side teams are working around the clock to care for our guests and get them home safely." This statement, and all others throughout the crisis, was well supported with properly dated and time-stamped messages via Carnival's social media. This allowed anyone following the crisis to spot the latest information easily.

Make the most of your press releases

Carnival's social media team kept journalists up-to-date with their social media, letting members of the media know when the releases were to be held and when they could be tweeted. In addition, their social media posts had links to press releases on their site and their Facebook posts had embedded links to press releases.

Using social media to listen and respond

The cruise line's social media team also carefully monitored online discussion, addressing questions that came up on line. Most importantly, they used Twitter to address and correct rumors. Given the length of this crisis, the longer it went on, the more likely rumors were to grow and gather steam. They did their best to stop them.

Mark the end of the critical phase of a crisis with a thank you

Carnival's team made its most important contribution to the future of the cruise line when the ship made landfall. Upon

landing, they posted "All Carnival Triumph guests should be back home with friends and family by now ... Crew will be making their way to other ships or back to their homes over the next few days. Thank you to our incredible guests, tireless team members and everyone who provided assistance this past week. Best wishes to all as their journey comes to a close."

These were immediately followed up with five more tweets that reviewed Carnival's dedication to "great vacations"; apologies to guests, family and friends and more thanks to those who helped end the situation, such as the Coast Guard. This followed an in-person dockside apology by Carnival CEO President Gerry Hill when the ship landed in Mobile. His heartfelt expression of concern and gratitude appeared genuine. Unfortunately, his attempt to "personally" deliver his message to each of the passengers onboard fell flat. It was carried over the public address system while the passengers were clamoring to get off the ship. Many didn't even hear it or care to at that point.

Make it right with action that lets people know you "get it"

Although no one can undo the mental and physical impact of such an ordeal, Carnival's gone a long way to make things right. Passengers will receive a full refund, credit for a future cruise, a flight home, and reimbursement for most onboard purchases plus \$500. Much controversy is swirling around whether Carnival's done enough, but the extent of their settlement offer tells me they are trying to do the right thing. Unfortunately, it won't be enough for some. The lawsuits kicked in less than 48 hours after the ship landed and the online ads from law firms trolling for "wronged" passengers are proliferating.

Recovery from any crisis is a slow and difficult process of rebuilding trust with words and deeds. Those of us who handle crisis communications also know that recovery from multiple, related crises can be particularly difficult. That's the case for Carnival. Their recent disasters have included a similar fire aboard the Carnival Splendor in 2010 and the Costa Concordia crash in 2012. These will make recovery especially tough. My observation is that they have the team and tools in place to do just that. And the message to all of us in business is that recovery is possible with compassion, concern and a willingness to make the most of the people and technology at our disposal. ■

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