



TC Public Relations



Managing Reputations

Tom Ciesielka has done public relations work for law firms, non-profits, and other organizations for 25 years. Read the following interview to find out more about his work.

What does TC Public Relations do for clients?

Primary what we do is reputation management and reputation management in the public relations realm is how you communicate in the media, how you are portrayed in the media, and how you react to the media. And in some cases also how you communicate with constituents or even adversaries.

Your reputation hangs on what you say. There are two ways of managing reputation—one is proactive, trying to get the media to cover something positive your organization is doing and then there's reactive, which is typically crisis communications where something has gone wrong and you're trying to mitigate or stop the damage.

What is a guiding principle that you follow in your public relations work?

I wrote a blogpost once called 'Everything I got from PR I got from a bottle of whiskey.' The story is, when I was growing up my father and I would go to the professional wrestling matches and we would buy the cheap seats. However, he knew an usher who if nobody was sitting in the nice seats, open seats ring side, we would go through a secret door, and he would let us go through the door to the lower section.

So, we would go from the \$5 seats to the \$50 seats. I noticed that when we were out and about he would drop by this man's house and give him a bottle of whiskey. I noticed early on the importance of appreciation and being respectful and realized the importance of recognizing someone for helping you out.

What is a good comeback story for a crisis you've managed?

I had gotten a call from a law firm in Chicago who was representing the CEO of an auto parts manufacturer in Detroit on a Thursday. This particular CEO was under investigation by the federal government, but when the decision came down from the jury he was exonerated for most of the charges except for one minor charge because he should have been more proactive in the investigation into how they conducted business.

The federal government had spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on legal fees, so when they put out their press release they emphasized the one minor charge and made that the headline and buried the fact that all the other ones were dismissed.

Unfortunately, with the news cycle getting faster and faster the media grabbed onto the first story and may or may not spend the time getting all the other information. It was a publically traded company which was worse because the bad coverage could affect stock prices.

I get a call from the attorney who cleared him of his charges. We went into crisis mode. We contacted all the media outlets who had positioned him incorrectly. We were honest about the slap on the wrist charge, and I would say every media outlet fixed the story within 24 hours. Our positive story had knocked out the negative stories saying he was exonerated.

So, Wednesday the negative publicity starts, it spills into Thursday, and we realize we'd better do something, and by Friday we had turned around his reputation.

Crisis Situations

Tom shared how he would manage a few hypothetical crisis situations

A lawyer shares too much information about a case on Twitter that has been heavily covered by the media. A reporter finds the tweet and reports the information. What does the law firm do?

The immediate thing I would do is tell the attorney to filter all media inquiries through their communications professional or if they don't have that I would recommend they filter them through the managing partner. Secondly, I would not recommend any verbal communication with the media, I would recommend a statement in generic terms..."We are aware that information has been distributed by one of our attorneys. We will be processing an internal investigation to find out what happened and we will follow our disciplinary action with attorney communications." That's really all you can do. The tweet went out with names and bad information.

If they don't have a crisis communication plan in place, would be to go to someone who understands reputation management. When you have the statement in place is to figure out the next thing that could happen.

The ARDC might investigate if there are complaints or look into attorney conduct and see how that plays out. One of the most important things to keep emphasizing is whatever comes in as far as inquiries has to be funneled.

A business executive for a Christian company is caught embezzling money to gamble. The company fires the employee causing confusion and the media wants to know if the company will turn the other cheek and not to press charges.

I would hope that everybody, Christian or non-Christian would follow an ethical approach. I think the media are going to come down a little harder on Christians, because you're the ones who are holy and talk about Jesus and you're doing things just as bad as everyone else.

It's kind of the same approach as the previous situation. You have to draft a statement, one notch above no comment, which is "While we cannot comment on internal investigations regarding employees we do follow the rules and regulations of our bylaws in how we pursue potential criminal charges or alleged misdoing by employees and we will follow that due process."

In both of these situations, in the moment of the crisis you think the world is going to collapse, and I think what you need someone to do if you have a smoking gun and everybody sees our smoking gun, how do we acknowledge it without saying we know who pulled the trigger. You do need to keep a cool head.

We think of crisis communication, and it's like fire in a building. If people freak out they're going to fall down the steps. If people freak out when they're doing crisis communication they're going to fall over their words and unfortunately, particularly if this moves into some form of litigation, everything that becomes public in the media becomes evidence, particularly quotes. What they have to realize is, as hard as it is, it will blow over, and with the news cycle the way it is it will probably blow over in a few days.

A live TV interview with an in-house attorney for a pro-life advocacy group gets heated over gun control which is unrelated to their organization's mission. The group receives feedback from their social media sites from supporters both in agreement and disagreement with his views. The Executive Director doesn't know how to approach the situation.

In that case it's an apology. A lot of times when you're going out to do media or publicizing you're going to decide who's going to be the spokesperson. Typically it's going to be the lawyer or a leader of the organization. If for some reason one of those people gets off message, it's probably because they didn't think through the interview. But moving forward, they have to do a lot of apologizing.

Then you have to figure out how do you deal with a genuine apology, and there's a difference between repenting and getting caught and saying you're sorry. Obviously this person got caught with a personal view that didn't have anything to do with his or her client, so now they have to repent.

We haven't talked about is the internal communication. Quite frankly, internal communication is the hard audience. If the attorney goes off message you're not dealing with media relations, but client relations. It's a different area, but the same principle.

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