How To Manage A Social Media Crisis:
A Psychology-Based Strategic Communications Approach

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Executive Summary

The reality of today's social media culture is that virtually anyone can seize upon a non-issue and transform it into a story that "sells" simply by cherry-picking facts and spinning them into a narrative designed to offend the sensibilities of a target audience. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other sites afford virtually unrestricted worldwide platforms from which to make accusations, leak information and manufacture false narratives. Founded or unfounded, the results can be devastating for individuals and corporations.

It's the narratives that are most dangerous. Stories go viral if they provide a narrative that captures the attention of a social media mob. And once a negative narrative takes root, it can be self-sustaining.

The very act of trying to repair an initial poor response often takes things from bad to worse. It has to be right the first time, so preparation is key.

When a potential scandal breaks, a company needs to be prepared to give its best response. There aren't many do-overs. The very act of trying to repair an initial poor response often takes things from bad to worse. It has to be right the first time, so preparation is key.

But what can be done when you can't predict where a social media crisis may come from or even identify or question its originator? How do you issue a timely response when there is no time to study what happened? And how do you buy time in a social media world that demands justice, but seems to have stopped caring about due process? '

The answers flow from an understanding of these two principles:

Principle 1: Most crises are predictable. They are inherently predictable because the origin of most crises is the conduct of the organization and its members. Effective stewardship and governance requires identifying the array of organizational vulnerabilities and putting in place unassailable guidelines, standards and principles for consistently operating in a way that minimizes the likelihood of those vulnerabilities being realized. Every organization has vulnerabilities and identifying them is at the heart of enterprise risk management (ERM).
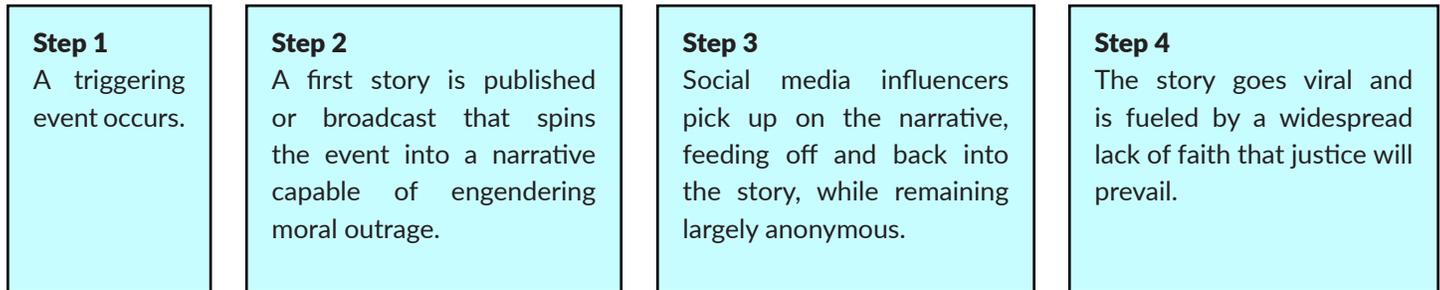
Principle 2: Common sense is of little use in uncommon situations. Letting "common sense" guide the response to a crisis often makes a bad situation worse because common sense leads to messaging that addresses the fears of the organization while ignoring the concerns of the public and other stakeholders. Common sense leads most organizations to rush to defend themselves and their point-of-view instead of considering the perspectives of their ultimate audience. When a crisis breaks it is essential to work to understand the perspective of all stakeholders. This is fundamentally a psychological exercise that should not be given short shrift. Organizations must communicate with the public and key stakeholders on their terms—and not from a "defended" viewpoint. When the psychology of the audience is ignored, stakeholders become online accusers.

At CSI, we pioneered the jury consulting industry and have adapted our psychology-based techniques to elevate how crisis and litigation communications is practiced. The powerful influence of social media demands a more sophisticated approach and a company's crisis team is incomplete unless it includes social psychology practitioners who are adept at creating psychology-based messaging that will resonate in a crisis situation.

The Anatomy of a Social Media Crisis

Social media mobs result from the progression through four stages in a crisis:

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
A triggering event occurs.	A first story is published or broadcast that spins the event into a narrative capable of engendering moral outrage.	Social media influencers pick up on the narrative, feeding off and back into the story, while remaining largely anonymous.	The story goes viral and is fueled by a widespread lack of faith that justice will prevail.

Once all four steps have occurred, a tipping point has been reached beyond which any calls to reason or for a measured response are met with increased fury. Welcome to the social media mob.

It is critical to realize that after Step 2, the organization has no control over whether a social media mob will form. After Step 2 it is too late. But Step 2 is amenable to control because that first published story will build off the company's initial formal response. The purpose of a formal response is not to express regret or sympathy—the purpose is to assure all stakeholders that justice will prevail.

If key stakeholders—including online influencers—believe that a just response will be forthcoming and that the appropriate steps will be taken to ensure similar incidents do not occur in the future, the mob will go searching for a more interesting narrative. But if they get the sense that the response is self-serving, disingenuous, or misdirected, the mob will spring into action with the intent of teaching whatever lesson they believe the organization and its leaders need to learn. For example:

In June 2019, Boeing's then Chief Executive Officer, Dennis Muilenburg projected the company's 737 Max would return to service by the end of 2019. As of this writing, predictions by the FAA are for the planes to return to service in April 2020, or later, and Boeing has just announced they are shutting down production of the craft for the foreseeable future. Mr. Muilenburg's projection back in June that flights would resume by December 2019 was no doubt well informed, but well informed does not equate to well-conceived. He could have used a "milestone reporting" strategy—that is, to list the key milestones the company would need to achieve in order to return the 737 Max to service. Then, the company could announce the completion of key milestones as they occurred and let the analysts and regulators make predictions about timing, while the CEO stood firmly on the message that the planes would not fly until he was personally satisfied they were safe. Not before. But his prediction appeared worse than incorrect, it appeared self-serving and hasty. These are the very attributes that the social media mob feared and led to the problems in the first place. As is often the case in a crisis gone awry, Mr. Muilenburg became the most visible symbol of Boeing's problems, resigning as CEO in late 2019.

In October 2019, a video posted on social media about billionaire Ken Fisher's highly inappropriate remarks at a wealth management conference (where he compared the practice of building client trust to "trying to get into a girl's pants") caused investors to pull nearly $4 billion from Mr. Fisher's money management firm. In response to the initial social media posts, Mr. Fisher sent an email to his employees (that was subsequently shared with media), stating: "I'm confident if you were there you would have understood what I said in context was nothing like what is being currently reported…" A day later, he took a more contrite tone, telling *Forbes*, "I realize this kind of language has no place in our company or industry. I sincerely apologize." But it was too late. Mr. Fisher mishandled the first response by reacting from the perspective of the "bubble" in which he lives and works, while not considering current social standards or the perspective of the socially conscious and highly accountable public pension funds who were his clients.

A Tale of Two Crises: United Airlines vs. Google

Real crisis situations provide the best insight for what can go right and wrong for companies in how they first respond. Here are two examples—United Airlines and Google—with completely opposite outcomes.

CASE STUDY: UNITED AIRLINES

United Airlines began experiencing a series of scandals in the spring of 2017, catapulted into the public eye when a 69-year-old physician named David Dao was physically removed from one of its planes by security after refusing to surrender his seat, as ordered. United's first response was to blame Dr. Dao.

United CEO Oscar Munoz issued a public statement and wrote a letter to employees. In the letter, he apologized for the need to "re-accommodate" customers and said he stood behind the crew's decisions. A United spokesperson also issued a statement summarizing what the company knew, saying Dr. Dao was "disruptive and belligerent" and that aviation officers were "left with no choice" but to "assist in removing the customer."

The statements and conclusions in Mr. Munoz's letter to employees and the spokesperson's statement may well be true. Accounts vary. What matters though is that the public saw video and read stories about Dr. Dao being dragged, bruised and bleeding, from the plane. When the letter and statement were viewed from within the context of the video, they took on a whole different tone—one of of indifference, arrogance, and victim blaming. The story captured the world's attention because of its narrative elements—providing a villain and victim and taking place in a setting where many people already feel vulnerable and helpless. The narrative was so powerful that people feared there was a systemic problem at United that would lead to further incidents. Social media exploded as millions of people expressed their outrage and fed off each other's posts.

United Airlines lost $1.3 billion in market value as a direct result. More concerning is what happened next when a series of United missteps tapped into the same narrative structure, wherein the company was cast as a villain harming innocent passengers, including children and pets. United lost billions more in market value. The cascading effect can be seen in retrospect:

1/17: "Death of Jacob the Golden Retriever" (no real interest in story)
4/09: David Dao incident
4/17: "Socialite Sues United"
4/17: "Bride and Groom Kicked Off Plane"
4/17: "Death of Simon the Rabbit"
4/17: "Passenger Sent to Wrong City"
4/17: United loses $1 billion in valuation
6/17: "Kid Kicked Out of Seat"
8/17: "Death of Lulu the Dog"
8/17: United loses billions more in valuation

We point to this series of United incidents not to rehash or judge their veracity. Rather, it is a classic case of how a single incident, when paired with an initial response that was perceived as self-serving and tone deaf, can turn into an ongoing scandal because a social media mob mentality has taken root. The result is real harm to a longstanding and trusted brand. United not only lost market valuation, it lost its good name. The series of stories following the Dr. Dao incident would not have garnered worldwide attention had they not fueled the trending narrative painting United as a bully—a trend that United's response also fed.

Once harmed, a reputation is difficult to repair, but United seems to have recovered and also gained new insights. An August 29, 2019 headline on *CNN* reported, "A boy with autism wouldn't sit still on a United Airlines flight. So crew members and passengers stepped in to help."

CASE STUDY: GOOGLE

Consider a second high-profile example: the Google Anti-Diversity Memo. In August 2017, a story went viral when a memo was leaked wherein a Google engineer wrote that, "Maybe there aren't so many women at Google because women are less interested in sitting around and staring at code all day." Google responded quickly and effectively, making it clear that the memo did not reflect the company's values or beliefs—and they fired the engineer.

There was an initial flash of outrage across social media; however, the story did not evolve into a brand-damaging scandal. Google's market value experienced barely a blip and days later returned to its previous levels and expected course. Given the #MeToo movement at the center of the national cultural conversation, as well as the spate of similar scandals coming out of other large tech companies, the relative lack of negative harm to Google was surprising.

DIFFERENT APPROACHES, DIFFERENT OUTCOMES

Why the difference in reactions between the United Airlines and Google examples? Why did one lead to a yearlong mob response and the other disappear from the headlines after days? The answer is multi-faceted and reasonable minds could argue for differing root causes. However, one clear difference is obvious: Google's response was clear and direct—but most importantly, it was neither blame shifting nor defensive and it contained actions, not just words. Google stated the engineer was in the wrong and fired him. In contrast, United's response was widely criticized for being unclear and uncertain, having initially called for an investigation, then seemingly placing the blame on Dr. Dao, and then reversing course and accepting full responsibility and apologizing, but without details for what they would be changing.

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Understanding Social Media Mob Psychology

Mobs aren't known for their clear thinking. Unconscious biases and hard-wired expectations about justice play significant roles in how otherwise reasonable people come to adopt a mob mentality. Not only do we want justice, we are driven to achieve it. It is in our nature. Moral outrage is at its core a deeply entrenched fear response to a perception of a lack of justice. When this kicks in it creates a powerful motivation to take quick action against the offender.

This kind of moral outrage can happen to anyone. All of us carry a sense of justice that motivates us to reward selfless sacrifice and punish selfishness that harms others or leaves them in harm's way. This fundamental moral sensibility becomes activated by our particular unconscious beliefs, wants, and needs that stem from formative life experiences. Biases cloud our judgement, and when they are triggered the result can be fear and anger. Moral outrage is a powerful force that moves us to act—often irrationally. Hallmarks include:

Skewed Thinking

Our rational mind can become coopted to the point of ignoring facts that contradict our beliefs and biases in favor of unsubstantiated information that supports our preferred conclusions. Studies show that well-reasoned arguments in opposition to our beliefs and biases tend to amplify—and not quell—disagreement. Thus, the effectiveness of cries about "fake news."

Self-Unaware

We can become blind to our own behavior; since the beliefs and biases are unconscious, our own lack of objectivity is hard to see. To the mob, the sought-after ends seem to justify any means.

Groupthink

We are prone to join with like-minded others and be buoyed by the security and anonymity this type of group membership can provide. Because it's so emotionally charged, the group can become a movement. For companies who are the target of such a movement, that's real trouble.

But these are not necessarily our destiny. Each of us has an opportunity to overcome our unconscious fears and biases and bolster our rational, conscious mind. Studies show if we spend time with people we're biased against, we get to know them better and do less stereotyping. The process gives the unconscious new information and experiences to process.

If you're under attack by a social media mob, you can't count on them to do the work of overcoming their own unconscious bias. All too often, calls to reason are like pouring gasoline on a fire. So what is an organization to do in the face of such powerful human drivers? Here are three things to remember:

1. If you're attacked on social media, don't be defensive—focus your messaging on what's fueling the mob.
That means understanding the group's psychology and framing the issues and your messaging in ways that tap into and shape the group's biases. What are their fears? How do they perceive your organization? What might they be right about? (Mobs are rarely 100 percent wrong.) The secret to dispelling the mob is to first stand in their shoes and see through their eyes before you formulate a response.

2. A fair process can be more important than the decision it leads to.
Online mobs want justice and that includes a demand that the process you use to make decisions is fair. This is a critical concept because an outcome that may appear unfair can still be deemed just if the procedures that led to it were fair.

3. Past a certain point the conscious mind intervenes and reason once again prevails.
The reason the world is not overrun by mobs is that when our mob-based beliefs cross the line into a delusional state, the conscious mind reflexively creates doubt and causes us to reexamine the views and assumptions that first led to our moral outrage. As a company under siege, you can't wait for this to happen naturally. Consider the power of highlighting the most rabid and irrational voices. This is one of several time-tested methods for "shaming" the mob to a return to its senses.

Understanding the psychology of groups has become vital to crisis communications because it provides the framework for responding when your company is the target of mob mentality.

Psychology-Based Crisis Communications

There are three strategies that any organization can use to prevent, mitigate, manage, and recover from a crisis situation, using a psychology-based approach:

1. Prevention and mitigation

KEY TAKEAWAYS:
☐ Identify your unique areas of vulnerability through careful scenario planning
☐ Establish unassailable operating standards
☐ Be in synch with current standards of public scrutiny
☐ Prepare, prepare, prepare

Evaluating the guidelines and standards a company has in place is central to its enterprise risk management (ERM) approach because that's where the organization is most vulnerable to public attack. This includes corporate policies to reinforce ethical business practices, customer-focused behaviors, and standards of conduct for all employees.

Having and consistently reinforcing the right standards provides an appropriate baseline for your company to respond in a crisis situation. The core principle is to establish fair and reasonable guidelines that most people can identify with and to reinforce the concept of justice by having in place a system for dealing with the root cause of an issue. That system must be up to current standards of public scrutiny.

It's also critical to prepare to respond if there is a crisis, particularly by knowing where your company is most vulnerable. If your organization collects personally identifiable information from its customers, then prepare for a data breach. If your company has far-flung geographic operations, prepare for the possibility of compliance issues among employees working under ethical guidelines. If there's the potential for environmental impact, then prepare to communicate in a disaster. If you're *any* organization today, prepare for workplace or other situations that may involve violence.

2. Effective communication strategies and tactics

KEY TAKEAWAYS:
☐ Understand the psychology of groups
☐ Focus on creating a narrative that speaks to your stakeholders—including online influencers
☐ Adapt as the crisis unfolds

It's critical to have the right narrative in order to stem a negative social media tide. In most situations, reputational damage occurs when the initial response is tone deaf or inadequate in some other way.

Often in a crisis, the immediate objective is to establish credibility by taking responsible actions—working to understand what caused the issue and defining how the company will address it. Working against the speed, ubiquity and force of social media, it's critical to communicate the right message from the outset, or risk losing control and watching the situation spiral past the tipping point. It's equally important to keep evolving the strategy, tactics and messaging as the situation changes in order to maintain credibility.

3. Reputation repair strategies

KEY TAKEAWAYS:
- ☐ Reputations are damaged when companies are perceived as lying, incompetent or uncaring
- ☐ Reputation repair requires realigning company values with stakeholder needs
- ☐ Success means leveraging the full array of communication tactics

Organizations that handle crisis situations properly often emerge with better reputations after the crisis has passed. This occurs most often when companies display genuine concern for the best interests of their stakeholders and act aggressively to protect those interests. The company's actions show that its values are aligned with its key stakeholders.

Reputational damage happens when a company is perceived to be lying, incompetent or uncaring in its crisis response. At its core, that type of response represents a rift with the values of a company's stakeholders.

The key to repairing a damaged reputation is realigning the company's values with those of its key constituents, and then actively communicating about how things have changed. To get in touch with those values, it helps to conduct psychology-based research into the wants and needs of a company's important stakeholder groups, and then align those insights to clarify the organization's core values and the guidelines for how it lives them. If the realignment and change are authentic, people will tend to give the organization another look—and a second chance.

Suggested Reading

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For More Information

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