

X-perienced files: Four organizational crises made worse due to poor communications

By John Gilson

As communications professionals, we know that a public relations crisis is always around the corner.

According to crisis management expert [Ian Mitroff](#), “every organization is virtually guaranteed to experience at least one major crisis.” These words should be sobering for leaders, communications professionals, and anyone responsible for protecting an organization’s brand and reputation.

Skilled communicators have the ability to mitigate many potential public relations fires by delivering timely communications that inform stakeholders. However, communications is a double-edged sword, and communicators – rather than fixing the situation – can make matters worse. Much worse.

Want evidence? Here are four examples below of recent crises that were magnified as a result of poor communication:

1. United Airlines (UA) talks policy on Twitter

Professional communicators need to talk to people like people. This rule is especially true in the more casual social media environment.

United Airlines recently suffered a major [social media backlash](#) when the airline denied entry to passengers because they were wearing leggings. The incident seemed ridiculous to most people, but what turned the situation into a viral crisis was the UA’s poor social media communications. Instead of using common language and empathy, UA replied to angry Twitter users with technical jargon (in 140 characters and less) to explain their policies and procedures.

2. Via Rail promises young Canadians the trip of a lifetime, but...

For Canada’s 150th birthday, Via Rail had an offer young people couldn’t refuse: an [unlimited number](#) of summer youth passes that would allow them unlimited travel across the country for the month of July. While promoting the offer, however, Via Rail didn’t anticipate how popular the offer would be; the “unlimited” offer wasn’t actually unlimited. As a result, many young people quickly soured on Via Rail, unleashing their frustration on social media.

It’s better to under promise and over deliver than it is to over promise and not deliver. Failure to deliver as promised will only lead to angry customers and – in the long run – reputational damage.

3. Rob Ford goes to war with the Toronto Star

When the Toronto Star published an article about a [crack video](#) involving former Toronto mayor Rob Ford, the mayor’s office retaliated against the Star by denigrating its reporters and attacking the newspaper. But rather than feel intimidated by Ford’s tactics, the Star kept digging, eventually leading to Ford’s political downfall.



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The Rob Ford story demonstrates the importance of maintaining positive media relations during crisis situations. As primary gatekeepers of information, the media controls the headlines, not you.

4. BP CEO checks out during oil spill

Situational awareness and the ability to “read” their stakeholders’ concerns is an invaluable trait for leaders and professional communicators.

Tony Hayward, the former CEO of BP, demonstrated a profound lack of situational awareness following the disastrous Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. To the astonishment of many, Hayward described the environmental impact as being “very, very modest”, among many [other gaffes](#), including a [poorly timed holiday](#). It was Hayward’s perceived lack of concern that made matters even worse for BP and would eventually lead to him losing his job.

If we want to survive a potential crisis, we must learn from the mistakes of others.

As seen in the examples above, the poor use of communications can turn a crisis into a shipwreck. Remember that timely, informative and empathic communications is a powerful antidote to any crisis.



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