

## Damage Control: Author Dezenhall Challenges Tylenol Cyanide Scare Response, Conventional PR Wisdom

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*This week's spotlight: Eric Dezenhall, CEO, Dezenhall Resources*

The old rules of crisis management don't cut it anymore, believes D.C.-based communications exec and author Eric Dezenhall. What's more: This is 25th anniversary of the Tylenol cyanide scare, which Dezenhall says should *not* be upheld as a model of crisis management. "The myth is they immediately recalled the product, but it actually took eight days. Retailers began pulling it first," says Dezenhall, who began his career in the White House Office of Communications during the Reagan presidency and has since managed "monster controversies" for top brands and personalities in the pharmaceuticals, petrochemical and entertainment sectors.

"This is important because you now have everybody upholding the 'instant recall.' But it's unrealistic because companies would constantly be in recall mode if they were to follow that line of thinking," explains Dezenhall, whose recently released *Damage Control: Why Everything You Know about Crisis Management is Wrong* advances similar claims and more.

"Another reason this is a bad model is nobody was blaming Johnson & Johnson for poisoning people," Dezenhall continues. "Everyone understood there was a madman on the loose and the company was a victim. It's easier to get out of a crisis in such 'sniper crises.' Far more common are 'character crises,' where the company is the villain. Those are harder to manage."

In addition: "There was also a very easy action you could take if you didn't want to die during the Tylenol scare. You threw out your Tylenol. But imagine telling a woman with breast implants to take them out," Dezenhall posits. "Imagine telling someone who bought a \$40,000 SUV to take it back. Ridiculous. You can't. So the Tylenol case was a relative storm of very easy actions and scenarios that shouldn't be held up for today's practitioners," he reiterates. "It's not the model we should be following—just as Calamine lotion isn't the antidote to diabetes. It's the wrong set of 'solutions' for managing the types of crises most of us face."

Read on for more of Dezenhall's controversial take on this sacred cow of crisis communications, his assessment of JetBlue's recent crisis response—and his sometimes surprising "new rules" of practicing PR in an increasingly adversarial age:

**How did the Tylenol case come to be so iconic if it's such a bad model?**

The reason it became known for being so brilliantly managed is that a PR firm that didn't handle it wrote a case study declaring it to be brilliant. They rewrote the facts and went around on road shows for years proselytizing the case.

Basically, it came down to some very clever PR people rewriting how it went down, positioning it as their own work—and then using it as a rainmaking tool. From there, lots of PR people preached this case for new business development purposes. Business school professors also love this case study and the "theories" behind it because it's so neat and tidy. But the truth is crises are typically far messier. Traditional crisis communications is rarely up to the task.

### **What's "wrong" with crisis communications as we know it?**

Conventional crisis communications is about issuing apologies, staying on message and getting out there quickly. That's insufficient. It should be more about recognizing that modern crises aren't always organic and simple. Instead, they're agenda-driven conflicts catalyzed by motivated adversaries. The best way to answer the question, then, is to say that modern crises aren't communications problems. They're conflicts.

Conventional PR is anchored in the belief that the public want to be educated, as if the public is waiting to hear more about what an industrial polluter has to say. But the truth is the public isn't listening. The Edward Bernays school of PR assumes that the public is a blank state to be manipulated. But my experience is they're not even listening. The public doesn't yearn to be educated by multinationals. So my perspective is that true crisis communications now is more guerrilla warfare than conventional warfare.

### **You claim in your book that PR isn't the best discipline to combat crisis—why?**

The answer is it's not in the DNA of most PR people to do what's necessary to manage a crisis. PR people by nature tend to be positive people who are very uncomfortable with the existence of conflict. They want it all to be OK. The problem with that is everything *won't* be OK when you're dealing with conflicts. What you have to look at in any crisis is not only what the problem is, but also what the DNA is of the people at table.

Corporate PR people are used to communicating positive information. They're not used to sparring with people who want to hurt them. Their job is about building and maintaining "relations." That makes sense when the focus is on news releases, speeches and the usual corporate communications mission. In that sphere, their DNA is correct. But not when you're dealing with crisis management, where you're facing hostile parties. Political-oriented PR people are less limited that way.

### **How does that critique of the typical PR mindset translate to advice for readers?**

For starters, corporations and their PR representatives should be better at attracting people to the table who have been through litigation. Bring on people who know what it's like to have protesters out there. Hire PR team members who have dealt with savage litigation and blanket negative media coverage. Realize that PR people who come from the marketing or "promotional" sphere are disasters at mitigating crisis.

Another tip that comes out of this is to be aware of your own hard wiring. If you abhor confrontation, don't volunteer for crisis work. Admit that you should be on the marketing side—and work hard to find the right partners to sit with you at the table when crisis strikes.

### **Who are those right people—who should be in the war room?**

Let's start with who *shouldn't* be there. Mid-level people with no decision-making power—get them out of the room. Others include: technical people with no capacity to summarize complicated things for public consumption, and note-takers or people who feel compelled to send detailed emails on laptops about the proceedings. When there's someone in the room taking detailed notes, I get up. I've had too many situations where I've later seen my memos in the newspaper. You never know the loyalties of the people in the room.

### **Could you explain that statement—why do you say that?**

A corporation under siege is no longer a company. It's a collection of individuals looking for self preservation, so you never know who will send that email to *The Wall Street Journal*.

### **So back to the question: Who absolutely must be *in* the room?**

The top lawyer, the top business manager or your CEO, a crisis counselor and an expert on whatever the technical issue or question is that's under consideration. That's it. And yes, you need a PR person in the room—but it has to be someone who is adept at dealing with bad news. If that's not you, find that person and get him or her in there.

### **What are some of your "new rules" of crisis management?**

For starters, don't always apologize. Bill Clinton and Martha Stewart survived scandals by avoiding apologies. Also: Seek recovery, not popularity. O.J. Simpson is reviled by much of the public, but he succeeded at avoiding jail. Another one is to fight back assertively instead of making nice. For example, Microsoft's vigorous fight during its anti-trust battle had much more impact on saving its reputation than Gates' attempt to appear more likable by wearing sweaters.

Don't try to spin a public that doesn't want to be spun. For example, BP's feel-good advertising didn't win over the public following 2005-6 allegations of leaks and commodity trading fraud. And don't confuse crises with conflicts, nuisances or marketplace assaults. HP made the mistake of inflating its 2006 boardroom leak nuisance into a crisis.

### **How do you think JetBlue responded to its recent crisis?**

I think they did fine. When the story broke, an interviewer for a TV news program asked me why JetBlue was in such a mess. I said one reason was they—and the rest of the media—were asking guests every hour on the hour why the company was in trouble. My argument was the media was in effect creating the crisis, as far as the response to it goes.

Related to that was the incorrect assumption by the part of the interviewer that the media would have covered JetBlue's response had it been handled correctly. That was a wrong assumption because then there would be no story. The old mother goose notion that if you do the right thing and apologize is total BS these days, because the media and online sites like some blogs are active investors in perpetuating the crisis. They only gain if they keep the crisis afloat. They need it to fill the news hole, get more viewers and, ultimately, be more profitable.

That aside, I gave JetBlue very high marks. Modern crisis management is personality driven, not "plan" or strategy driven. So having their CEO out there in an evangelical way was fantastic. People want to see the person, not the plan. That's what we respond to, and it worked for them.

The belief in the "plan" really is the ultimate PR avoidance strategy. Obsessing about what the crisis plan should be is the best way to sound like you're doing something when you're really just avoiding the issue at hands. Honestly, it takes a second to determine strategy. What you need is

the vehicle for communicating that plan—and today, it really comes down to people standing in front of the problem like their CEO did.

When I talk to a client under siege, I first ask who the lead is. If they say they need to flesh out the strategy first, that's when we push back from the table.

### **What did JetBlue do wrong?**

I think it was the original sin. Crisis management all comes down to control. When you have people stuck on the runway for 11 hours, you have committed an unforgivable sin. Those people had no control over their lives. Better to cancel flights and piss people off than to leave them in a coffin for 11 hours. When all is said and done, crisis management is about giving consumers control.

### **What did you think of JetBlue's apology—did it give consumers that control?**

I thought it was great. I thought it was more than just the typical PR apology. It actually came equipped with penitence and action. The great mistake of crisis management is the belief that the apology is the answer. I savage that in the book. The apology must come with an offering or a threat. JetBlue came with the offering of its "Passenger Bill of Rights" and actions that included refunds. That's why it works. But the problem with most PR messaging is that it isn't supported with behaviors driving the company. It's just that—messaging.

### **What other crises have you been watching—what lessons spring from them?**

The biggest is the Department of Justice scandal. Here's why: When a crisis begins, there's always a tremendous pressure to respond quickly. PR 101 insists that you get out there fast. The problem with this is that you often don't know squat right away. But if you say that, it looks like stonewalling to the media.

So, Gonzales got out there and pretended like he knew. He probably didn't lie willfully, but he came out half-cocked and looked like he lied. Now he's in the impossible situation of convincing people that he didn't lie. You never get that moral equity back. It's far better to piss people off for a few days while you get your act together than it is to attempt to feed the news hole and speak quickly. Another example is the pet food story. They don't know what caused the problem, but the media's still clamoring for an answer no matter what.

### **How have the blogosphere and new media changed the nature of crisis?**

The blogosphere is an active investor in a target's destruction. It is a beast that demands and feeds on negative information. It actively resists any vindicating information about a target of attack. Why? It's human nature. We all like to be the ones to traffic in dirt. We want to be the first ones forwarding the email of Britney with her shaved head because it gives us power over the target.

People want control. Obama is popular right now in part because we are responsible for making him a god. Once he gets too big and forgets the little people, we will tear him town. Martha got so big that her base ceased to be able to relate to her as "one of us who made good." Then she got more coverage than ever when she went to prison. You couldn't turn around without seeing another Martha headline.

Also, blogs want to break things first. It's their way to get their name out and tear down their enemies without research or barriers. Years ago, if I wanted to place a bad story, I would have to

convince an investigative reporter. He'd resist due to journalistic standards. He'd have to spend weeks, if not months, on the research. But online, someone can plant a rumor that you're being investigated by the Department of Justice, for example. The rumor will spread, without any research. To top it off, newspapers will contribute to the rumor by reporting that "there are rumblings online that X person is being investigated by the Department of Justice."

### **What is the best way to defuse an online situation like that?**

I think it can sometimes happen only through legal action directed at the perpetrator, and by drawing attention in the broader media to the fact that someone is using this technique online. Knowing that they're being watched can have a chilling effect on hostile actors—and that includes blogs. The mistake many PR people make is thinking that if they refute the claims and talk about good things, it will outweigh the negative. My perspective is that doesn't work. You have to instead put the bulls-eye back on the attacker.

### **Do you believe the media is always looking for a "villain" and a "hero" in a crisis?**

Every crisis has three Vs: the victim, the villain and the vindicator. The public only understands narratives, not crises. We want to know who to like, who to believe and who to hate. That's how the media tells its stories related to crises.

### **So how do you make yourself the vindicator and not the villain?**

A crisis is resolved when you muddy the rigid roles of these three types of characters or when you reverse the roles. For example, Wendy's was the villain initially during the chili crisis. The victims were the public and the woman who "found" the finger. The crisis was resolved when the narrative was switched and Wendy's became the victim and the woman became the villain.

Candidly, it rarely switches that quickly. So the goal of PR person is to enact that switch. In the case of Wendy's, it took an investigation to expose there was a real villain in this other than the one initially believed to be the villain. So as a PR person, ask yourself if it's possible to alter the villain. If so, will that take investigative, law enforcement or even legal elements? Also, be aware of this model—that the media is looking for those three characters in its crisis stories. Knowing this will give you a framework within which to work.

### **What is the number one crisis tip you learned during your tenure at the White House?**

The most important factor in who survives a crisis is the fundamental likeability of the target. People liked Reagan. They let him slide on a lot of things. I was a 22 year old kid. I wasn't a power player, but I do recall that Deputy White House Chief of Staff Mike Deaver would rarely let Reagan talk to hostile audiences with the belief he would win them over. Instead, he was just put in situations where he was strong and audiences liked him.

So the tip is this: Nothing is to be gained by trying to convince people who hate you to like you. Preach to the choir instead.

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