

When facing a crisis, beware of enemies

By Robert Campbell, Reuters | May 6, 2007

NEW YORK -- Conventional wisdom in the public relations industry tells companies to build bridges with their opponents and keep the lines of communication open, even when bad news leads to uncomfortable publicity for a company.

Nothing could be more wrong, argue two Washington-based crisis management consultants.

"One of the greatest myths of public relations is that you can get hostile audiences to like you," write Eric Dezenhall and John Weber in "Damage Control: Why Everything You Know About Crisis Management is Wrong."

Crisis managers should adopt a "political model," which assumes that a company has enemies -- competitors, trial lawyers, the news media, Wall Street, politicians, regulators, and bloggers -- that are bent on destroying their business.

Dezenhall and Weber argue that [Johnson and Johnson's](#) success in defusing a poisoning scandal in 1982 has duped the public relations industry into thinking there is only one way to deal with a crisis: empathize with the public and turn a bad situation into a good outcome for the company.

In September 1982, seven people died after taking Tylenol pain relievers tainted with cyanide. Johnson and Johnson swung into action, recalling and destroying 31 million Tylenol capsules at a cost of \$100 million.

Executives appeared in television ads and at news conferences informing consumers of their actions and introducing new tamper-resistant packaging.

The quick reaction to the tampering was credited with saving the Tylenol brand. Sales of the pain reliever jumped back to precrisis levels even though the person who tampered with the capsules was never caught.

The difference between this case, which PR consultants tout as the Holy Grail of crisis management, and most other corporate crises, the authors argue, is that Johnson and Johnson was a victim itself.

"The corporate scandals that dominate today's news are mostly of a different strain: The company's very character is on trial . . . The public doesn't just want answers; it wants vengeance."

In dealing with a hostile environment a company is best served by cultivating its natural supporters and attacking its enemies and working to occupy the moral high ground.

"Apologies tend to work better when the behavior in question is viewed as aberrant versus revelatory," they note, claiming this is part of the reason why oil major [BP PLC's](#) carefully constructed green image offered the company little protection from critics when a corroded pipeline in Alaska led to a major oil spill last year.

The blurring of the lines between news and entertainment and the rise of the Internet is making

aggressive responses to corporate crises more important than ever, Dezenhall and Weber write.

Businesses will have to function like modern politicians: communications targeted at sympathetic audiences and preemptive attacks on opponents who will seek to undermine companies are the new rules of the game. ■

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