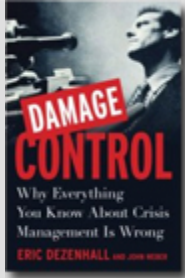




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## TURNING CRISIS WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

*Damage Control: Why Everything You Know About Crisis Management is Wrong*

By Eric Dezenhall and John Weber

Penguin Group, New York (2007)

212 pages; paperback \$18.96 via [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)

Crisis pros Eric Dezenhall and John Weber have written a book on damage control to refute the "current dogma of surrender that permeates the PR industry-the template that a capitalist enterprise is a guilty enterprise."

A business can only rise above a crisis if its counselors embrace capitalism as something that "must be defended, not cringingly tolerated."

They equate a well-managed crisis to a tale of redemption. Redemption, write the authors, is anchored in truth and the best vehicle for the truth is a hearty defense.

"The hackneyed chestnuts of conventional PR have not withstood the crucible of our uniquely savage climate," according to "Damage Control: Why Everything You Know About Crisis Management Is Wrong."

### Make it less bad

The goal of crisis management is often to make a bad situation less bad, according to Dezenhall and Weber, who is president of Dezenhall Resources in Washington, D.C.

"If conventional PR has been disparaged as telling pretty lies, then crisis management should be praised as telling ugly truths," they write.

The executives call crisis management "unpleasant work." There aren't any corporate executives giving each other "high-fives" every time a media attack is averted. You won't

find "crisis management academies out there doling out statuettes for bad news averted." Relief is the reward of crisis managers, they note.

### **Tylenol, Exxon revisited**

Dezenhall and Weber review many PR textbook crises. They tackle the "crisis mythology" that grew around Johnson and Johnson's Tylenol affair. The drug giant has been lauded for its "instant" recall of the capsules though it actually took eight days after the first deaths were announced before Tylenol was removed from the market.

In a "quasicomical twist," PR consultants with peripheral (if any) connection to Tylenol sang the praises of J&J's "brilliant" crisis plan in many business forums, thus "repeating the central myth of the instant recall," write Dezenhall and Weber.

The authors, on the other hand, believe Exxon may have been unjustly branded for "handling the worst crisis in corporate history." Though Exxon Valdez was responsible for the biggest oil spill in U.S. history, the company spent \$2.2B to clean up the mess and earned a commendation from the U.S. Coast Guard for the effort.

That recovery story never got out. "Instead, what got covered were heart-wrenching pictures of oil-coated birds and dying seals juxtaposed against the failure of a company to swiftly put forth an executive who could express regret and outline the company's game plan," the authors write.

Prince William Sound recovered far faster than Exxon's reputation. The company has acquired a "character crisis," which is when the very moral fiber of the company-not the events surrounding the crisis-comes into question. Exxon is now an "allegation magnet" at which every accusation hurled by critics sticks.

Crises handled by Martha Stewart, Firestone, Lance Armstrong, Catholic Church, Tyco, Wendy's and Merck are analyzed in Damage Control.

### **Apologies don't always work**

The authors present Richard Nixon as Exhibit A as why a person or company can't make a crisis just go away by just

saying sorry.

They conjure up an image of Nixon apologizing for Watergate. "Instead of resigning and rising off into the heavens on Marine One in anticipation of a pardon, Nixon would probably have been tried in a court of law, convicted, and dragged down Pennsylvania Avenue chained to a pickup truck," write Dezenhall and Weber.

Dezenhall and Weber note that an apology may be interpreted by a judge and jury as an admission of guilt. The apology though "is the tactic du jour of the PR industry because it is seen as a way for the mighty to show human qualities. The apology often stops short of confession, employing weasel words that give the apologizer immunity from the consequences of the original sin," they write.

The duo believes an apology works during a crisis only when a person surrenders something small (pride) but something big (freedom) is preserved.

### **Can only spin those who want to be spun**

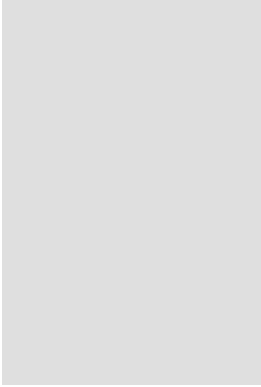
The authors are critical of the PR profession's belief in "building bridges" to connect clients with adversaries.

"One of the greatest myths of PR is that you can get hostile audiences to like you," they write. "In reality, you can only 'spin' a public that wants to be spun-reinforcing existing sentiments and prejudices, rather than reversing fundamental positions."

They write about the "delusions of value-changing propaganda at work in our current war on terror." While it is good that moderate Muslims may be attracted to Western culture, "never in the history of wartime propaganda has it been the goal to get your enemy to like you. Rather, the chief objective of wartime communications is to rally one's allies and frighten one's enemies," they write.

"Preaching to the choir" during a crisis is a positive in Dezenhall and Weber's book: "Some of the most successful communications defenses involve rallying one's base, even if it means provoking one's adversaries."

For instance, cyclist Lance Armstrong appealed to his fans and commercial backers after French authorities accused him of using performance-enhancing drugs in the Tour de



France.

It worked. "French don't like Lance but so what? Americans do. Armstrong retired and endorsements remained lucrative," write Dezenhall and Weber in their book to be officially published April 23.

— *Kevin McCauley*

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