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Managing Fake News Before and During a Real Crisis

By Elizabeth C. Ortega

We live in a world where facts and shared realities are usurped all too often by viral disinformation and rumors. Artificial intelligence manipulates fake news, giving it a veneer of credibility – and that's dangerous.

The challenge for communications professionals is how to set the record straight for clients that must resolve crises caused by disinformation. Even if a threatening situation is not yet a crisis, there may come a pivotal point of paracrisis when an expert can transform a threat into an opportunity.

We cannot entertain all noises, only reputable ones. Otherwise, we become noise ourselves, ruin our reputations, and taint our influence.

Until a response becomes unavoidable, the best approach is to not respond at all, but instead, watchful waiting. A vigilant standby policy protects confidentiality and provides guidance to corporate stakeholders, including legal and PR/communications teams. Once a response becomes a strategic imperative, the most impactful vehicles for carrying it are channels controlled by the brand, digital platforms such as social media, websites and apps.

When a corporation or an individual is informally accused of irresponsible or unethical behavior – even if the claim is false – the threat must be taken seriously. At this moment of paracrisis, when a situation is just starting to deteriorate, there's still time to take action to protect the brand and avoid a full-blown disaster.

For example, the recent apparent suicide of a high-profile and beloved lawyer received widespread coverage and sparked questions on social and mainstream media about whether the deceased lawyer's law firm bore some responsibility.

The firm responded to the insinuations by acknowledging the tragedy, describing its active mental wellness resources, and vowing to continue investing in them. Firm leaders successfully steered public perceptions away from misinformation and toward their salutary commitment to nurturing dialogue and mental wellbeing.

Brand Development is Preventative Care

Foundationally, the business must foster a strong sense of self. Any undefined brand lacking a clear mission, vision, and values is a vulnerable target. Carl Jung would say, "The world will ask who you are, and if you don't know, the world will tell you." Each entity must consistently seize and assert its own authentic storyline.

Even when a paracrisis is simmering, corporate life goes on. The client should continue collaborating with trusted advisors to uphold the company's values and to bank goodwill via thought leadership and the support of socially beneficial causes. This philanthropic connection bears impact should the client ever need colleagues to speak out against disinformation.

Origin of the News

Always consider the source. Find and evaluate the primary source of disinformation, separating out what's objective from what's not. Keep in mind that biased sources speak to particular audiences who are primed to believe them. If any are stakeholders or

future clients, it's crucial to find ways to reach them with the truth.

As for mainstream media, there are ways to determine which are reliable and which represent special interests with set agendas. Consult [the Media Bias Chart](#) to vet print and internet sources. An informed viewer uses a well-developed bias antenna to tell the difference between Fox News and CNN cable channels in two minutes flat or less.

Strategic Communication Approach

Arresting fake news before it causes reputational harm requires skills and tactics that fall within the wheelhouse of a communications professional: strategic and collaborative planning, constant vigilance, real-time analysis and a keen sense of timing paired with the ability to act quickly.

The best way to manage a developing paracrisis, or a mature crisis, is by following a comprehensive plan that envisions every possible scenario. Since speed and flexibility are decisive, a plan that all participants understand must be ready for activation at a moment's notice.

The mantra for all firm news is "watchful waiting." Someone should continually monitor mainstream and social media for any mention of the firm, good or bad. Even fake news floated by a bot or some other AI creation must be taken seriously because it could reach and impact a receptive audience of stakeholders, potential clients, and/or competitors.

If the paracrisis is internal, caused by spreading gossip and rumors, management should take constructive and non-punitive steps to contain misinformation. The situation must be cauterized quickly, before the false narrative can gather momentum and unearned external credibility.

Avoid falling prey to the immediacy of social media. The fact that a development is the subject of a post does not necessarily mean the content is truthful, or that the firm must respond and give it oxygen.

But realize that social media cuts both ways. If you make a practice of leveraging it to boast about positive developments, you're tacitly agreeing to satisfy public curiosity with factual feeds. When the chips are down, followers are readily watching and waiting to hear from you. Continue to engage in a timely, approachable and relatable fashion to avoid dependability gaps, especially when admitting an error.

Don't overvalue independence. A [recent study](#) of the connection between fake news and crisis management posits that communication professionals must be able to act without consulting other key corporate players. Giving communicators latitude to act autonomously is intended to prevent the chaos created by the over-involvement of detractors or opinionated stakeholders.

Such an approach does not work in litigation PR, however, because it risks inadvertently hindering a legal strategy by breaking confidentiality. A more effective approach, built on mutual respect, is to trust experts in their respective domains and bring them together collaboratively. A PR team's expertise is the court of public opinion; tailoring the message to the intended recipient is key. Always ask: "Who is the audience?"

We can only expect an uptick in crises emanating from fake news and disinformation. The best response is a comprehensive crisis and risk management plan. Speaking with a single voice guarantees that sensitive information will remain in-house, right where it belongs to uphold the corporation's values and reputation.

About the Author

Communicator [Elizabeth Ortega](#) is principal of ECO Strategic Communications and co-founder of The International Academy of Financial Crime Litigators.

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