

PR Guru Dick Pirozzolo Urges CEOs to Practice Issues Management Hygiene

Corporations must practice good Issues Management Hygiene to avoid the kind of crisis United Airlines suffered in the press according to PR authority Dick Pirozzolo, APR of Boston who told his readers there are three elements to crisis management: Emergency Management, Issues Management and Crisis Management itself. "It's a three legged stool of corporate communication," said the veteran PR consultant who is highly regarded for his role in solidifying US-Vietnam relations.

May 17, 2017 (FPRC) -- In a recent LinkedIn article, PR Guru Dick Pirozzolo urged CEOs to practice Issues Management Hygiene if they want to avoid the kind of media fallout United Airlines suffered after it forcibly removed passenger from a flight.

Pirozzolo said, "It was painful to watch the smart phone videos of law enforcement agents dragging Dr. David Dao through the aisle while a major carrier slow walked its response—from blaming the customer to the announcement of a lawsuit to a financial settlement and finally an apology by CEO Oscar Munoz."

He added, "Though CEO Munoz struck out during his first at bat, he finally connected by instituting a number of reforms. He increased compensation for bumped passengers, empowered employees to more easily resolve passenger complaints on the spot, and even provided a phone app to assist them in doing so."

According to Pirozzolo, whose Boston-based Pirozzolo Company Public Relations offers crisis management and media training, "United's mistakes could have been averted if the company had recognized and planned for all three components of communication management that propel companies onto the nightly news and create infuriating Twitter storms."

They are: Emergency Management, Issues Management and Crisis Management

United and the airline industry generally get A+ on only one of the three components, Emergency Management, Pirozzolo explained. "Carriers anticipate and have detailed plans, personnel and systems in place to deal with customers, family members, the media and other stakeholders in an emergency and they know how to coordinate with government agencies like the NTSB when the most dreaded of operational failures occurs – a plane crash. And they practice."

While it's best to routinely review and practice the fundamentals of crisis management with the CEO and review the crisis management plan periodically it's harder to make it happen Pirozzolo observed, adding, "Notwithstanding, savvy senior managers are smart enough to listen to their public relations counsel, once they find themselves in the midst of a media maelstrom."

The Department of Defense offers a solid definition of a crisis: "A low-probability, high impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution, as well as a belief that decisions must be made swiftly."

Additionally, a crisis has the ability to impact public opinion and trust in an organization and devalue its brand equity.

"United, with some expert PR counsel, eventually moved on from the crisis, however, the game is not over for the private airport security firm that, acting on orders from the airline creating the viral video sensation in the first place," Pirozzolo said.

While the value of Emergency Management and Crisis Management principles and practices is well understood, organizations fail, according to Pirozzolo, when it comes to Issues Management practices, which often stems from a firmly held belief among senior management that "our organization is different—special, better, even unique."

In the LinkedIn article he went on to say, "Military leaders, for example, certainly read the newspapers and watch the news about issues involving Second Amendment rights and their relationship to workplace and gun violence, changing attitudes toward sexual harassment at work, decriminalization of drug possession and the epidemic of opioid addiction, legalization of marijuana, immigration policies and so forth.

"All too often corporate leaders convince themselves that the problems associated with these hotly debated issues cannot possibly impact the people I manage because we're different, more disciplined, prouder, more cohesive.

"And then stories, seemingly out of the blue, emerge about Marines passing around nude photos of their female colleagues and an Army major goes on a murderous armed rampage at Ft. Hood. Everyone is caught off guard because of an it-can't-happen-here culture."

Same goes for the airline industry. News outlets are filled with reports of customer angst over outdated crowded airports, overbooking, flight delays, burdensome TSA procedures, and burgeoning checked baggage fees. Flying is miserable, getting worse every day and the customers are doing a slow burn.

Asks Pirozzolo, "Yet, United couldn't see this? Other airlines as well had to wait until Dr. Dao was dragged off a flight before examining their own customer relations practices? No one saw the pressure cooker of public discontent was about to blow its lid?"

The LinkedIn article called for looking at the fundamentals. "Issues are what you find yourself discussing with peers and press most of the time. Most issues develop over time, and they can generally be seen developing if one pays attention. Issues offer professional communicators the most time to put a management plan together that addresses emerging concerns and growing sentiments before they harden into rock-solid opinions. Take heed of trends and don't be shocked when what's happening out there happens under your own roof," wrote Pirozzolo who has managed issues ranging from recognition of a former enemy nation, Vietnam, to acid rain as an environmental threat to bridges and autos.

For something to be an issue, whatever is being examined or talked about must have two or more strongly opposing arguments being made about it.

For something to be an issue, a large number of people must be emotionally involved with whatever is being discussed. Finally, issues typically involve a concern people are experiencing about a

decision they see as having an impact on their lives or the smooth functioning of society.

Professional communicators face a variety of issues; environmental issues, medical issues, social issues, gun lobbying issues, and consumer protection issues are but a few. In many cases the organization will have a position none or more of those issues that, say zero tolerance over sexual harassment and age, racial or gender discrimination. "But intensity can build rapidly, consider how quickly the town hall meetings with US Representatives and Senators over healthcare policy turned rancorous," warned Pirozzolo.

He reminded his LinkedIn readers: "Smart PR pros are tuned into emerging issues, responsive to public opinion shifts and intensity, prepared with a clear message and willing to advocate for a shift in organizational behavior when the tide of public opinion is going against you."

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