# Public Relations Case Studies: Strategies & Actions

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# Introduction

Welcome to *Public Relations Case Studies: Strategies & Actions*. This OER textbook provides students with real-world PR case studies. The case studies explore PR dilemmas and campaigns in a variety of sectors and circumstances. The book offers learning opportunities about audience analysis, campaign planning, strategy, tactics, message development, media relations, and crisis communications for the PR practitioners of today and the future.

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This book was edited and compiled by Sam Schechter. Acknowledgements to contributing authors and copyright notices are included on a chapter-by-chapter basis.

# Learning from Case Studies

by Sam Schechter

The study of public relations is one more defined by best practices than theory or models. While both exist, the experiences—both positive and negative—of PR practitioners working in the field, often in harrowing circumstances, offer invaluable learning opportunities for students.

Many of the case studies in this OER textbook link real-world events with models and/or theories that PR practitioners may have learned in school, perhaps even from another OER textbook: *Public Relations: From Strategy to Action*. Such connections help to crystalize the thinking of a PR practitioner, giving structure and tangible examples to otherwise conceptual learning.

This is one of the pinnacle learning opportunities that comes with case studies. Generally, a case studies explores what happens in a microcosm to consider what learning from that case can be applied globally or, in the reverse, a case study may explore a global phenomenon and consider how learning about that phenomenon can be applied to a specific campaign, client, crisis, or circumstance.

As students read these case studies and consider the learning opportunities to which they are exposed, these are the questions they should be posing to themselves:

- What happened in this case study that could be effectively applied elsewhere?
- What happened elsewhere that could have been applied to the circumstances of this case?
- How does this case study validate PR models and theories?
- How does this case study challenge PR models and theories?
- What successes from this case study can be replicated?
- What failures from this case study should be avoided?

Critically considering those questions will bring each case study to life and maximize the learning that each offers students.

Enjoy the case studies and take note that more will be added over the coming years.

# Case Study #1: Better.com Doesn't Live up to its Name

By Kristin Ignacz, 2022

## The Case

Vishal Garg is the founder and CEO of the digital mortgage company Better.com (Towey, 2021). The Better.com website encourages users to call and get pre-approved for a mortgage in as little as three minutes. Unfortunately, that is not the only task the Better.com CEO thinks should take three minutes. On November 25, 2021, Garg fired 900 staff members over a Zoom call of the same length (Butterfield, 2021).

Even though Better.com had just received $750 million as part of a merger deal, Garg blamed the changing market and low productivity as reasons for layoffs (Feuer, 2021). He unsympathetically announced on the Zoom call that Better.com needed to reduce its staff so the company could survive and to fulfil its mission within a changing market (Feuer, 2021). The key message that his terminated staff heard was: You are fired because the finances of the company are more important than you are. Garg wished his employees luck before their workstations shut down and their immediate termination began (Azevedo, 2021).

Garg's layoffs also sent a clear message of expendability to a secondary audience: his remaining employees. To drive this message home, Garg initiated a townhall meeting with his remaining employees the following day. The key message to his staff was to work harder or they too would be fired. He established a "Better 2.0 plan" with a "leaner, meaner, hungrier workforce" (Towey, 2021), where his staff would be heavily monitored and where failure was unacceptable.

## Public Relations Failures

In both meetings with his employees, Garg made the critical mistake of ignoring his dependency on a critical resource: his employees. From a public relations perspective, he failed to see that his employees were potentially the most important public, even more than his customers and stockholders (Guth & March, 2007, p. 57).

Garg made countless public relations mistakes during both employee meetings:

- During the Zoom call Garg assumed an "unapologetic tone" (Feuer, 2021) and his body language was casual and disengaged to demonstrate a lack of concern and duty of care for his employees. The three-minute length of the call also demonstrated disrespect.
- During the townhall meeting, Garg's threatening and devaluing messages to his remaining vulnerable employees demonstrated a complete lack of empathy and an unethical use of power.
- Garg failed to recognize that the values of his employees were different than his own; his employees' top priority was not the financial position or mission of the company, as it was for Garg. He failed to know his audience.
- Garg's egocentric one-way messages repeatedly used the words "I" and "the company" instead of making the meetings about "you": his employees. He failed to prepare a better message or encode the message in

a way that would be well received.

- Garg was not transparent about the company's major recent infusion of capital; telling his employees they were being terminated so the company can survive when the company just received $750 million was dishonest; the CFO of the company had received a $850,000 annual raise and Garg himself had received a $25 million bonus (Fluke, 2021).
- The timing of the terminations was poorly planned and occurred exactly one month before Christmas, a practice most audiences would perceive as heartless.
- Among those fired were the entire diversity, equity, and inclusion team (Butterfield, 2021), thereby sending the message that Better.com lacks corporate ethics or social responsibility.
- Garg also unlawfully offered the terminated employees only half of the legal amount of severance that they were owed (Fluke, 2021). This spurred a class action lawsuit that further highlighted the company's dishonesty and business ineptitude to Better.com's internal and external audiences.

Garg's actions resulted in countless disgruntled employees who held power over the company's reputation. Recordings of the Zoom call and townhall meetings were posted online. Traditional press outlets began to pick up the story. External audiences were shocked and outraged.

## Response and Action

What was Better.com's response as the crisis broke?

They did nothing.

Experienced public relations professionals know the importance of acknowledging an issue immediately and providing a truthful and carefully crafted response on multiple media outlets to protect the reputation of the company (Cardin & McMullen, 2014, p. 256). Instead, Better.com did nothing, failing to control the message and failing to engage in any reputation management.

The reason for this appears twofold. First, the director of public relations, the director of marketing, and the vice president of communications all quit directly after the terminations and townhall meeting. Each of these key advisors cited their reason for leaving as Garg's management style and inability to take advice (Feuer, 2021). In a well-run business, the public relations department should be involved in major decisions to advise management about how stakeholders and the public will react to certain practices (Cardin & McMullen, 2014, p. 253). At Better.com, Garg had dismissed the importance of this advice and had lost his advisory team and crisis management team as a result.

Second, because of Garg's lack of interpersonal skills and unethical personal values, he felt he had done no wrong. As such, he failed to acknowledge the public's expectation for a response and felt he had no reason to communicate with intervening audiences, internal audiences, or external audiences.

Garg should have acted by accepting fault and providing solutions publicly and transparently.

Instead, he secretly took to social media under an alias name (Towey, 2021). Most public relations professionals will assert that "If you participate in any online discussions, always identify which company you are representing. It is highly unethical and almost always counterproductive to pretend to be someone you are not.... Chances are someone will identify who you really are, causing you and your organization embarrassment" (Cardin & McMullen, 2014, p. 185).

This is precisely what happened to Garg. He took to Blind.com under the alias name “uneducated” where he accused his terminated employees of only working two hours per day (Towey, 2021). His rude and aggressive comments told the public to “get educated” (Taylor & Gross, 2021). Once Garg was exposed as the author, his actions reinforced negative public opinion of his unethical and untrustworthy nature.

By completely failing to control the message and insulting key stakeholders in the process, the crisis escalated with intense media and public criticism. The reputation of Better.com and Garg spiralled beyond control.

On December 6, 2021, 11 days after the Zoom firing, a message was finally released on the Better.com website media section. Instead of presenting a press release and preparing a wellcrafted media resource section, Garg simply posted a copy of a letter that was addressed to his remaining staff. The letter continued to make the same mistakes that he made during his meetings and focused on the company instead of his employees. It was also too little, too late.

The meager apology to staff was received by the public and media as disingenuous. Garg then took a leave of absence from the company.

To date, the apology message to staff is the only item listed under Better.com’s media section regarding the crisis.

## Outcomes

Better.com has become famous for its terrible treatment of staff and has secured one of the top spots on Bloomberg’s top PR blunders of 2021 (Alaimo, 2021). The company’s relationship with most publics has been heavily damaged, particularly the relationships with his target market and target investors.

According to Forbes Advisor, Better.com’s target market are Americans aged 20-34, a group of digitally savvy folk who also represent 37% of homebuyers in the market (Tepper, 2022). His tech savvy audience naturally took to social media to express their disgust with Garg’s actions. One example is opinion leader Joshua Fluke who has 495,000 YouTube followers and 13,000 Instagram followers. His series of YouTube videos examining Garg and Better.com have amassed near 600,000 views and 33,000 likes (Fluke, 2021). His key message in each video is that Better.com is dishonest, inauthentic, and should not be supported.

Better.com was planning to go public by merging with Aurora Acquisition Corp. for a combined company value of $16.9 billion (Daniels & Hurst, 2022). The company planned to go public in December 2021; however, these plans were delayed (repeatedly) due to the damaged reputation of the brand. Trusted financial analysts continued to advise investors to, “consider waiting until the dust settles before planning to buy shares of Better.com” (Tepper, 2022). By undervaluing his relationship with key stakeholders, Garg’s actions have directly and negatively impacted his relationship with his target market, his social capital, and his bottom line.

How many staff have resigned from Better.com since November 2021 remains unknown; however, one certainty is that Better.com will have difficulty finding and retaining quality staff in the future.

## A Better Plan than Better.com

Several points have been made in this case study about Better.com’s failures and what an experienced public relations official should have done instead. Overall, what can be learned from Better.com’s failures?

## Building respectful and loyal relationships matters.

Better.com had terrible relationships with its employees through a toxic work environment and equally disturbing relations with its investors that resulted in several lawsuits (Fluke, 2021).

Building trusted and loyal relationships with the public and a variety of stakeholders is a crucial component of any business. Building relationships is also a critical part of a crisis prevention strategy (Cardin & McMullen, 2014, p. 254). Before quitting, the PR team may have tried to put pre-crisis strategies and issues management in place; however, they were insufficient to counteract the damage that Garg inflicted on the company daily. Two-way communication is the key to building relationships.

## Ethics matter.

Unchecked power from an unethical CEO is a public relations crisis waiting to happen. Public relations professionals must implement a code of conduct and a code of ethics: two codes Better.com lacked. Internal managerial audits and training to create responsible managers who demonstrate moral and ethical principles is also important to create a positive organizational culture and mitigate issues.

## The message matters.

When Garg addressed his staff, both in the Zoom meeting and in the townhall, genuine, compassionate, careful messaging may have prevented this crisis from escalating. A positive example would be of Airbnb who laid off 1,900 staff in 2020. The CEO's message confirmed absolute transparency and made their employees feel valued. Every decision was made with thoughtfulness and compassion (Kelly, 2021). Airbnb received positive publicity for their ethical practices and positive messaging.

## Preparation matters.

In addition to a crisis prevention strategy, a well-crafted media resource section on the company website is important. Also, working with the media prior to a potentially damaging event can assist with reputation management. Better.com could have used embargo agreements with media to manage perception and control the message at the time of the terminations.

## Execution of the public relations plan matters.

When crisis strikes, an immediate, ethical, and transparent response with solution-based answers is crucial to success. Know your audience; create a persuasive message; control the message. As seen in the case of Better.com, if you fail to control the message, someone else will.

Hopefully, we can all aim to do better than Better.com.

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# Case Study #2: A Good Time, Not a Long Time: The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge

By Doyin Agbaje and Hannah Lind, 2022

## Background

The ALS Association is a US-based non-profit organization whose focus is on funding the advancement of global research into Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, a debilitating and life-ending disease (ALS Association, n.d.). The organization's aim is to discover effective treatments and, ultimately, a cure. Alongside this, a large portion of their funding goes directly towards patient care and services (ALS Association, 2021). In 2014, the ALS Association experienced one of the most sensational non-profit fundraising successes in history: the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge.

Pat Quinn, Anthony Senerchia and Pete Frates—three men who were living with ALS—were credited as co-founders of the original campaign (Associated Press, 2020), which invited people to dump a bucket of ice water on themselves to briefly simulate the physical sensation of numbness and loss of body control that comes with ALS. Along with dumping the bucket of water on themselves, participants were urged to film this action, post the video online, and challenge others to participate—and to donate to the ALS Association.

Unwittingly, these three men launched a fundraising campaign that went viral across social media and ended up raising over $100 million (ALS Association, 2019).

## Goals

The Ice Bucket Challenge was originally intended to raise awareness and understanding of ALS and to encourage people to make donations to the Association (Sifferlin, 2014). The target audience was first-hand social connections to the original participants who had a personal interest in the cause and could then spread the message across their networks.

By the time the national headquarters of the ALS Association became looped into the growing trend through a local chapter representative, the social media reach was growing exponentially and the primary goal appeared to shift to simply maximizing financial donations.

## Key Actors and Actions

Beyond Quinn, Senerchia, and Frates—whose presence was also later important to help discount criticisms that such a campaign made light of such a serious condition—many others became important figures in the campaign.

Carrie Munk—chief communications and marketing officer for the ALS Association—played a key role in managing the viral response and her background in crisis communications proved crucial in maintaining

strong internal and external messaging throughout the campaign (Nichols, 2015). This involved counteracting misinformation and providing transparent financial information.

As the campaign's two-step model grew and built wider engagement, key actors included notable participants, such as Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey, LeBron James, and George W. Bush (Steel, 2014). The first media attention for the campaign came from NBC News personality Matt Lauer being nominated (Trejos, 2017).

Engaging Hollywood proved a huge success. Many participants likely joined in after seeing their favourite celebrity taking the Ice Bucket Challenge. Although instigated by people who had ALS, the campaign became viral when celebrities were nominated. This was the reason for its worldwide circulation.

Transparency instilled confidence in participants and the media. The organization was transparent in the presentation of donations received and how it was used for research efforts (ALS Association, 2019). This had the effect of increasing credibility and a sense of trust.

## Key Messages

The key message of the campaign was: "You should donate to this cause because you might help to find a cure for a serious disease and you'll have fun while doing it." The message was encoded by promoting an engaging activity that encouraged people to participate, nominate others, and donate. The message was disseminated through social media, predominantly Facebook, Youtube, and Instagram. As people experienced the Ice Bucket Challenge, the message proved true and their enthusiasm to spread the message was self-replicating.

## Outcome

The challenge spread like wildfire; about 71 million people participated worldwide (Trejos, 2017). The ALS Association raised $115 million USD (ALS Association, 2019). The money was committed to research and led to breakthroughs: a handful of genes associated with ALS were discovered (2019).

Although the organization successfully raised millions, the main original cause of the challenge was neglected. The challenge (and hashtags) shifted from the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge to the Ice Bucket Challenge. Many individuals who participated, including the authors of this case study, were unaware of what ALS was and what the donations were for. The challenge became a generic trend on social media and many celebrities failed to mention anything about donating in their posts (Wenn.com, 2014). Although the ALS Association experienced a spike in searches about the condition at the time, in comparison to the millions of participants worldwide, the ratio demonstrates a lack of engagement from most participants. Despite the worldwide participation in the challenge, many donations went to other charities (Townsend, 2014). The outcome was that the goal of creating awareness was hindered and seemingly a small percentage of people actually donated, albeit eventually aggregating into a huge sum (Steel, 2014).

Likewise, the challenge was short-lived. It only lasted a few weeks, as people quickly forgot the cause (Trejos, 2017). If the goal was to create long-term awareness about the disease, this was impeded. The ALS Association tried to make the challenge an annual tradition, but could not replicate the traction of the original campaign.

Despite these negatives, the campaign was incredibly successful in terms of popularity and financial gain. This case suggests that social media may provide a temporary boost in visibility and funding, but those effects can be ephemeral and short-lived.

## Learning for PR Practitioners

The ALS Association itself acknowledged that the success of the campaign was "lightning in a bottle" (Ruiz, 2017). However, there were features to its popularity that PR practitioners may be able to replicate:

- The national ALS Association responded positively to the grassroots activity from people who were their direct stakeholders. This fostered credence and credibility with the audience and neutralized claims that the campaign was frivolous. This also serves as a reminder that national umbrella organizations need diligent and regular media monitoring so that they are closely following the activities and campaigns of local chapters.
- The campaign made participation emotionally rewarding. Some of the audience's motivation was completely different to those of the originators and the ALS Association—in this case, simply having fun with minimal knowledge of the cause—but capturing that enthusiasm nonetheless paid off for everyone.
- When launching a campaign, organizations should find a quiet point in the news cycle or look for a time when media audiences are in need of a "feel good" story (Ruiz, 2017).

Going viral can be a double-edged sword. If the goal is to achieve a temporary boost in funding or promoting an activity, virality could be worth pursuing. However, the potential benefits must be weighed against factors such as the investment of necessary time and energy to control the message and deal with any unintended consequences. The ALS Association, for example, had to restructure their organization to manage a hugely scaled-up budget, while still providing transparent information to donors about how donations were spent (Nichols, 2015).

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# Case Study #4: A Matter of Survival: Public Relations Strategies of the British Royal Family

By Tessa Chandler, 2024

The public relations strategies of the British royal family have long been a fascinating case study for PR students and professionals. Over the reign of the late Queen Elizabeth II, which dominated the previous century of the monarchy, the strategies of the institution and of the individual family members have evolved. More recently, the family members have further advanced their communications strategies to effectively use social media and global streaming platforms to reach their audiences.

The survival of the British monarchy depends on the protection of their reputation and public image; their public relations strategies reflect this goal. The institution is unique, as they are not driven by sales or profit, so studying how they maintain a positive relationship with the public offers unique insight compared to other PR actors.

The monarchy has maintained a close relationship with the British media to secure positive press and to share their own stories. Some members, such as the late Princess Diana, used her media exposure to her advantage, while others preferred a "less is more" approach when dealing with the media.

Incorporating media relations and crisis communications strategies is key to the monarchy's success engaging the average British citizen. In a crisis, they are typically quick to respond, to make a public statement, and even to apologize for their mistakes when necessary. A notable exception to this is following Princess Catherine's cancer diagnosis, when the monarchy's lack of honesty and openness was a public relations failure.

Like any organization, the monarchy and their Royal Communications department experience successes and failures. They must continue to evolve and improve their PR strategies to ensure their survival, which is dependent on how the public perceives and values them.

## Public Relations Strategies

Like many large organizations, the royal family has its own in-house public relations office—Royal Communications—which employs former media professionals. This integration of media and PR professionals highlights the importance of knowing and understanding the workings of the media for the monarchy. The monarchy has generally taken a "less is more" approach to media releases and official communications; being honest and addressing the facts were key to the late queen's public relations strategy. She maintained a clear and consistent communication style throughout her reign. Elizabeth II prided herself on knowing her audience and understanding the key issues they faced at any given time (Licano, 2019). She maintained a "never complain, never explain" approach to communications (Hornery, 2023), unlike the royals of the 21st century, specifically Harry and Meghan, who take a much more open approach.

Their Netflix special, Oprah interview, and Harry's memoir, *Spare,* have attracted support from some audiences sympathetic to their situation and highlights the perceptibly honest nature of their communications (Hornery,

2023). An institution often criticised as being inaccessible, Harry and Meghan's departure from this standard strategy has been welcomed by many. Viewing the media as a partnership, the monarchy employs long-practiced strategies for interacting with and using this partnership to their advantage.

However, in more recent years, with the evolution of social media, which has allowed for anyone to become an amateur journalist, the monarchy has needed to evolve their public relations strategies to avoid the spread of "fake news" or "clickbait" stories. With that, younger royals—once again, notably Meghan and Harry—have developed this more open communication approach, using social media and other formats to reach wider audiences and share their personal narratives (Vanderhoof, 2023).

## Relationship with the British Media

Interacting with the media is inevitable for the institution and is essential to fulfilling their role in British democracy. In a 2021 interview, however, Prince Harry discussed the "invisible contract" between the British royal family and the media. He claimed that, as an individual family member, if you entertain the media and provide "full access" to your life, then you will ultimately get better press (Hornery, 2023). If you try to maintain privacy, you will risk misrepresentation in the media.

There is a deep sense of fear, but also an acknowledgement, that the media is an essential vehicle for royal communications efforts. For members of the family, media acceptance does not also equal public favour and popularity. Also, more representation in the media does not necessarily influence people to become more interested in the monarchy (Vanderhoof, 2023). Prior to their departure from their royal roles, Harry and Meghan received particularly "hateful" treatment from the media that significantly contributed to increasing tensions within the family (Bingham, 2023). Furthermore, there is also competing interest in the media among individual family members. During the height of Princess Diana's popularity, she was gaining more attention and public adoration than the queen, upsetting senior staff and family members (Vanderhoof, 2023).

## A Lesson in Crisis Communications

One of the key tasks of the Royal Communications team is crisis management. Responding promptly and professionally is key, particularly when facing potential threats to public image. When Harry and Meghan decided to step down as full-time working royals, Queen Elizabeth II was praised for responding quickly. This showed that the family had nothing to hide. She laid out a plan for moving forward after the couple's departure and how that would affect the public and the family. In doing so, the queen made clear that she supported and respected their decision. More importantly, for any crisis response, the queen was always prepared in her statements to the media and the public, communicating the values and key message of the institution (Talenfeld, 2020).

Queen Elizabeth II was also adept at connecting on a human level with her audience. Due to the immense outpouring of grief following Princess Diana's death, the queen broke protocol and gave Diana a funeral service reserved for active members of the institution. She went even further and personally interacted with mourners outside the palace following Diana's death. This was widely praised by the media and the public. The queen understood the needs of her audience, a mourning public that needed leadership and empathy, and changed the monarchy's communication strategy accordingly.

## Successes and Failures

Princess Diana was a master of public relations; she maintained a positive public image, even when she was disliked by members of the royal family. Her compassion and ability to empathize with all people made her more accessible than any other royal family member (Zitelmann, 2019). Diana's biographer claimed she was an "artful practitioner" at using the media (Zitelmann, 2019); she held great power and public admiration thanks to the immense media attention she attracted.

Following her divorce with then Prince Charles, the release of her biography revealed the unhappiness of their marriage and painted a picture that Charles was solely to blame for their divorce. She got ahead of the story to share her own narrative and influence audience opinion to gain sympathy and support (Zitelmann, 2019). *Diana: Her True Story,* authored by Andrew Morton, but with contributions by the princess herself, gained her media attention and public devotion and support that lasted until her tragic death.

Through interviews and ongoing media attention, she maintained a recurring narrative of being a "wronged woman," one of whom the monarchy disapproved of and tried to silence. This practice broke the "never explain, never complain" tradition of the monarchy's communications. In doing so, she appealed to a huge global audience that could identify with her plight and emotionally connect with her (Zitelmann, 2019). Diana's key message was that she wanted to be "the queen of people's hearts"; she ensured there was constant positive stories about her in the media. This was essential to maintaining her image as the compassionate, relatable, and wronged woman who escaped the royal family (Zitelmann, 2019). Princess Diana is a prime example of the varying PR strategies used by members of the institution. Some family members are more successful than others in the court of public opinion.

In January, 2005, Prince Harry attended a costume party wearing an old German military uniform with a Nazi swastika. The uniform justifiably caused outrage in the UK and abroad. While his actions were a public relations disaster, the monarchy's communication team was quick to issue a full apology and express regret for his behaviour. Taking accountability and swiftly issuing a direct and honest apology eased public outcry. Their efficient apology was praised by leading members of the Jewish community (Jones, 2005) and is evidence of the effectiveness of their crisis response strategies, notably taking accountability and apologizing when appropriate (Vanderhoof, 2023).

More recently, the coronation of King Charles was a public relations flop. In what was an attempt to attract public attention away from the ongoing conflict with Meghan and Harry, Camilla's *Country Life* documentary aired during the same time as the event to gain attention and support for the new king. It did little to draw attention to the coronation and to excite the public about the new king. Unfortunately, Charles already lacked the public adoration and support that his mother held. This event was further example of his relative disapproval among the British public (Vanderhoof, 2023). Charles' failure to garner positive public opinion is emblematic of the failure of his PR strategy, attempting to distract the public rather than to face his lack of popularity head on.

In early 2024, Catherine, the Princess of Wales, announced a cancer diagnosis amid widespread public speculation and controversy surrounding her departure from public life. Royal communications around this time were vague surrounding the Princess' diagnosis, which closely followed King Charles' own cancer diagnosis. As in the past, the monarchy attempted to downplay the severity of the crisis, but were criticized for their lack of transparency (Nicholl, 2024). With two such influential figures stepping back from public life, the monarchy appeared more vulnerable than ever. The public and media were quick to speculate and share conspiracy theories to explain Catherine's sudden departure.

The “vacuum” of information, unfilled by the monarchy, coupled with a lack of honesty and transparency, weakened their connection with the public, who criticized their lack of communication (Nicholl, 2024). The crisis worsened when, to help quell speculation, the palace released a photograph of Kate and her children for Mother’s Day. Media commentators quickly recognized that the photo had been manipulated, causing some outlets to refuse its publication (Nicholls, 2024). Not only did this create more uncertainty about the status of the family, but it also prompted distrust in the official communications of the organization.

Princess Catherine ultimately admitted she had edited the photo herself, but this did little to put the public and the media at ease. The lack of transparent communications surrounding the event was a significant failure by the monarchy and the Royal Communications office. While the photo brought the public some reassurance surrounding her wellbeing, it also created doubt in the integrity of the organization, which worsened the feelings of distrust that already developed from the lack of information prior to the release of the photo (Nicholls, 2024).

Furthermore, the communications response was simply too delayed. After releasing the photo, speculation began immediately, yet it took over 12 hours for the communications team to respond with a statement (Laing, 2024). Being honest about who is sharing a message, taking accountability, and acting swiftly are key components of crisis communications that were absent in the monarchy’s response (Laing, 2024).

## Key Learning Points

A commitment to honest communications and understanding the audience and their needs is essential. When questioned about his relationship with Harry, William responded that “we’ll always be brothers” and that “stuff happens.” This response is relatable, honest, and does not go into the detail of the conflict (Licano, 2019). Crisis communication theory and modern media study suggests a “don’t add oxygen to the fire” approach; to give an issue “air” will allow it to spread and worsen (Vanderhoof, 2023). The royal family routinely implement this strategy in their public relations practice.

The PR teams of the royal family members have also shown the importance of using policy and law to support their public statements. This is useful for plainly and firmly supporting their position and maintaining their approach of not adding “oxygen to the fire.” When a media outlet reported William was cheating on Catherine, his brief media statement clearly stated that it was factually incorrect and a breach of his right to privacy “protected by the European Convention to Human Rights” (Licano, 2019). This allowed them to efficiently quell the rumours and show the media that the royals would not accept any defamation.

Princess Catherine’s recent photo editing blunder and the monarchy’s failure to adequately respond are examples of how their traditional communications strategy: “never explain, never complain” (Laing, 2024) is not always effective. The communications were ambiguous and Royal Communications lost control of the narrative, appearing dishonest. This highlights their need to evolve their “never explain” strategy (Laing, 2024).

Open communication could have minimized the severity of this recent public relations failure. The monarchy failed to appreciate the scale and reach of modern audiences online and adjust their public relations strategy accordingly. Being honest, transparent, and acting quickly—but always with accuracy—is more important than ever, as social media allows for stories to circulate faster than ever (Laing, 2024). Their response to the doctored photo was too little too late (Serhan, 2024) and Royal Communications proved to be incapable of keeping up with the frenzy of speculation created by their vague communications (Serhan, 2024).

In considering theoretical models of public relations, the royal institution is unique. They are not driven by product, profit, recruitment, or election; their communications are solely about protecting their image and

the integrity and survival of the institution. There is not one single target audience, but many, as they aim to reach audiences in varying demographics across the globe, such as women who could sympathize with Princess Diana, or now younger audiences who can relate to Harry and Meghan's more modern public relations approach. Information is largely distributed via the mainstream media using media releases or interviews. Their approach is useful for study by public relations practitioners, as it highlights the need for honest communications and, further, that evolving an institution's public relations strategy is essential to its survival. Finally, establishing a strong crisis communications model is key. The failure of the institution's response to the Princess' photo scandal is an instructive example of the need for a strong crisis communications plan for any organization.

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## Cover Page Photo Credit

Jones, M. (2017). Prince Harry and Meghan Markle on Christmas Day 2017 [photograph]. *Wikimedia Commons*. *https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Prince_Harry_and_Meghan_Markle_on_Christmas_Day_2017.jpg*

# Case Study #5: PETA Denuded

By Lauren Dallow and Neetu Lakhan, 2018

## Background

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) was founded in 1980 (PETA, n.d.). Over the decades, PETA has grown into a global organization with millions of members, making it the largest animal rights organization in the world (n.d.). PETA works through public education, cruelty investigations, research, animal rescue, legislation, special events, celebrity involvement, and protest campaigns (n.d.).

Committed to protecting the rights of animals, PETA believes that animals are not meant to be eaten, worn, experimented on, or used for entertainment (PETA, n.d.). These are the four areas where PETA believes that the most animals suffer and so they are the four areas where PETA focuses its attention (n.d.).

## The Campaign

One of PETA's earlier campaigns was the "I'd Rather Go Naked than Wear Fur" campaign launched in 1991 (Rose, 2012). The purpose of this campaign was to use celebrity spokespeople to discourage the public from wearing leather, fur, and wool. The campaign is still going on and has featured such notable people as Pamela Anderson, Kourtney Kardashian, Naomi Campbell, and Olivia Munn, photographed naked with slogans added such as "Fur? I'd rather go naked" (Bousquet, 2017).

PETA tends to choose celebrities who are often viewed as sex symbols to pose for these images; a number of the celebrity spokespeople have been models or Playboy Playmates. One could infer that PETA subscribes to the advertising cliché that "sex sells," as they use this strategy not just for their print public service announcements, but also for public protests (PETA, n.d.; Sheppard, 2014).

## Criticisms

PETA has become well known for provocative naked or semi-naked campaigns and, even though it has garnered negative public reactions, PETA appears to feel that, even if people are complaining, at least they are talking about the issues. Nothing yet has discouraged PETA from using controversial images to deploy their message. In October, 2017, a graphic billboard went up in Detroit for a related campaign that featured R&B singer DΔWN naked with a section of her skin being torn off; the billboard reads "Leather is a rip-off" (PETA, 2017).

Of course, PETA's strategy of using naked—often female—celebrities to pose for the "I'd Rather Be Naked" campaign has led to criticism that PETA is relying on sexist attitudes and the male gaze to draw attention to the cause (Pennington, 2013). Additionally, the images are argued to be dehumanizing the women featured in the images (Orbay-Cerrato, 2013). Yet, PETA stands by this strategy and continues to employ it, but the strategy does not actually seem that effective.

## Analysis

While provocative ads are more likely to grab attention, the attention is short lived and viewers tend not to think critically about ads that feature sexual images (Reichert, Heckler, & Jackson, 2001). PETA's ads in the "I'd Rather Be Naked" campaign feature minimal print and the naked images do not explain why PETA wants the public to be against wearing fur, wool, and leather. Therefore, viewers must go online and do their own research into the topic, which is unlikely if the image has little or no lasting effect (Reichert, Heckler, & Jackson, 2001).

The effectiveness of the current strategy employed by PETA for their campaigns becomes apparent when examining whether fur sales have been at all impacted in the time that PETA has been running the "I'd Rather Be Naked" campaign. From 2000–2010, global fur sales rose about 70% and annual sales of fur pelts reached $15-16 billion between 2010 – 2011 (Sauers, 2012). This is a painful indictment of the failure of PETA's campaign. Additionally, designers who had not used fur before were starting to add fur pieces to their runway collections, as fur became a trend once again (Sauers, 2012). Despite widespread efforts over a number of years by PETA, fur sales were booming, proving that, at least in this case, sex did not sell.

## Compounding Problems

The revolving door of celebrity spokespeople has caused PETA some embarrassment, as some of the celebrities who posed for PETA in the past have taken to wearing fur again. Both Cindy Crawford and Naomi Campbell modelled fur after posing for the "I'd Rather Go Naked" campaign (Rose, 2012). Other celebrity spokespeople, such as Khloe Kardashian, have since cut ties with PETA, giving the appearance that PETA is not very selective in choosing their spokespeople (Rose, 2012). Indeed, campaigns must ensure that celebrities are truly committed to their cause, otherwise a reversal, such as noted here, will do more harm than good, undermining the campaign more than supporting it.

## Key Learning Point

The main lessons learned for PR practitioners from PETA's "I'd Rather Go Naked" campaign should be that using sex to push an agenda is often not the best choice and to be wary of using well-known public figures as spokespeople. Provocative images do not have a lasting effect on viewers and viewers are unlikely to go through the effort to research a cause further, simply because the campaign features sexualized images. Additionally, if an organization chooses to make use of celebrity spokespeople, they must be selective of who they recruit for their cause and be aware that the individual's future actions may reflect poorly on the organization.

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# Case Study #6: Bud Light & Social Media Influencer Dylan Mulvaney

By: Charlene Co and Chidinma Obi Odunukwe, 2023

On April 1, 2023, American beer producer Bud Light sent influencer Dylan Mulvaney customized Bud Light beer cans that featured her image to celebrate the anniversary of her gender transition. Mulvaney, a trans influencer who rose to fame as she documented her transition, went on to post a video of herself on her social media accounts dressed as the character of Holly Golightly in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, toasting to "March Madness" and "**day 365 of womanhood**" (Mulvaney, 2023). In the post, which was a paid sponsorship, she also encouraged people to send videos of themselves carrying Bud Light beers for a chance to win US $15,000 (Mulvaney, 2023). The video was posted on her Instagram and TikTok accounts, where Mulvaney had over 1.8 million and over 10 million followers, respectively.

The post went viral. While some cheered Mulvaney on (Walsh, 2023), the post spurred fury among Bud Light's consumer base—notably far-right conservatives—followed by calls to boycott the brand (Stewart, 2023). Among the high-profile protestors were American rocker Kid Rock, who was seen shooting cans of Bud Light while spewing expletives (Kid Rock, 2023); country artists John Rich and Travis Tritt severed ties with the beer, saying they're banning the brand from their tour (Daw, 2023). On the other hand, podcaster Joe Rogan and radio jock Howard Stern weighed in, calling the vicious reactions exaggerated (Di Placido, 2023).

As discussions surrounding the backlash and the reaction (or lack thereof) from parent company Anheuser-Busch continued in the following weeks, so did reports of Budweiser's sales dipping. At the end of April, there were reports that Bud Light sales had fallen more than 11% (Philipps, 2023); on May 13, sales were reportedly down by 28.4% (Wile, 2023). In early June, Budweiser was reported to have lost the bragging rights as the "#1 Selling Beer Brand," with Modelo Especial taking the coveted spot (Revel, 2023).

## Actions Taken

### Anheuser-Busch releases a statement *(April 3, 2023)*

In the face of growing criticism, on April 3, Anheuser-Busch, maker and parent company of Bud Light, defended its decision to work with Dylan Mulvaney as a brand influencer through a released statement:

> *"Anheuser-Busch works with hundreds of influencers across our brands as one of many ways to authentically connect with audiences across various demographics. From time to time, we produce unique commemorative cans for fans and brand influencers like Mulvaney. This commemorative can was a gift to celebrate a personal milestone and is not for sale to the general public." (Hur, 2023)*

The company's first attempt at alleviating the situation was widely ill-received. Critics saw the statement as refusing to take a side or, at the very least, standing by its decision to take on Mulvaney as a paid ambassador (Bronner, 2023).

## CEO releases a statement *(April 14, 2023)*

Two weeks after the Mulvaney post, Anheuser-Busch CEO Brendan Whitworth issued a statement titled "Our Responsibility to America," which stated that they "never intended to be part of a discussion that divides people. We are in the business of bringing people together over a beer" (Anheuser-Busch, 2023).

Whitworth adds that he is "responsible for ensuring every consumer feels proud of the beer we brew" and mentions the number of people the company and its distributors employ. "We have thousands of partners, millions of fans and a proud history supporting our communities, military, first responders, sports fans and hard-working Americans everywhere," he said (*Anheuser-Busch, 2023*).

## Social media (in)action *(April 14, 2023)*

There was no activity on Bud Light's Instagram account for two weeks after the Mulvaney post. On April 14, it shared a photo of a beer on Instagram with the caption: "TGIF?" Some of its followers were disappointed with the brand's silence and expressed their dissatisfaction in the comment section, none of which Bud Light addressed. Bud Light then turned off the option to comment on their posts.

## Leadership shakeup *(April 21, 2023)*

Alissa Heinerscheid, VP of Marketing for Bud Light, and marketing executive Daniel Blake took a leave of absence, with Budweiser global marketing VP Todd Allen taking over in the interim *(Springer, 2023)*. The company said that this move was part of streamlining its marketing structure, so it can "maintain focus on the things we do best: brewing great beer for all consumers, while always making a positive impact in our communities and on our country" *(Beer, 2023)*.

## Cancellations of April events

Citing safety concerns amid alleged employee threats, a Budweiser distributor in Springfield, Missouri, cancelled all planned appearances of the Clydesdale horses following the Mulvaney backlash *(Zymeri, 2023)*. The Clydesdales horses, which have grown as a symbol of the repeal of the prohibition of beer in the 1930s, have been an integral part of Anheuser-Busch's marketing and advertising for decades *(Anheuser-Busch, n.d.)*, even being featured in Super Bowl commercials—the penultimate annual advertising moment for an American beer company.

## PR Learnings

### By collaborating with Dylan Mulvaney, Bud Light detached from its core audience.

This Bud Light campaign violated the cardinal rule of communication, which is to know your audience and put them first (Schechter, 2023). Historically, Budweiser's ads and promotions revolved around its sponsorships and partnerships with sports teams and major sporting events, with a message that a Bud Light, or a Budweiser, can be best enjoyed while watching a sports game; this strongly suggested that Bud Light has a male-dominated target market. The brand's core value is that Budweiser "brings people together for game time" (Budweiser, n.d.).

And this worked: according to Beer Marketer's Insights, Anheuser-Busch held roughly 39% of the beer market in the United States in 2021 (National Beer Wholesalers Association, n.d.).

Interestingly, however, Bud Light has, in fact, created inclusive campaigns in the past. In 2016, the brand launched the "Bud Light Party" campaign that featured American comedians, Seth Rogan and Amy Schumer, in an ad meant to "champion the brand's message of inclusivity among modern beer drinkers and bringing people together" (Anheuser-Busch, n.d.). This invites a question: did Bud Light try to ascertain the political "threshold limits" of its primary audience regarding the LGBTQ conversation? Did it, perhaps, push the envelope a bit too far for its customers' political leanings with the Dylan Mulvaney campaign?

### The company gave a cowardly and tepid response to an issue both sides felt very strongly about.

The company failed to take a definitive stand on the issue: does it fiercely defend its decision to make Mulvaney a brand ambassador and, by extension, stand by its support for the LGBTQ community, or will it side with its established far-right consumer base?

While its first released statement attempted to defend the move to have Mulvaney as a brand ambassador, it needed more determination; the statement gave the impression that the brand was sitting on the fence and refused to take a side. It was a missed opportunity to reinforce the company's direction to be more inclusive. The second statement from the CEO read like a sanitized canned response, which, despite its length, did not say anything substantial that spoke to the intense emotions felt by either side.

### Bud Light did too little and too late.

Mulvaney posted the video on April 1 and immediately received backlash. This issue was kept in the media for most of the month, with reports of dropping sales attributed to the controversy coming in well into the two months that followed. Bud Light's responses were few and far between. Presumably, the company thought that people would eventually lose interest by not bringing more attention to it. Instead, this silence led to a flurry of theories and misinformation.

Rumors swirled that no one at a senior level at Anheuser-Busch knew about the partnership. At the same time, a satirical website published a post that claimed Anheuser-Busch let the marketing team behind this campaign

go. It was shared by social media users as fact, prompting the company to confirm that "there is no truth to that statement" and reiterated that the commemorative beer can sent to Mulvaney with her face on it was not intended for wider release (Tulp, 2023).

## A problem of mixed messaging: Is Bud Light, in fact, for everyone, or loyal to its most ardent fans?

Today, brands face the conundrum of whether they must re-think their marketing and communications strategies so that they resonate more with ethical and socially responsible consumers—or, as some might put it, the "woke" generation of customers. While admirable and not to mention long overdue, if not done thoughtfully, these well-meaning intentions can cause brands to venture into politically dangerous territory where they might find themselves back-pedaling on their words because they are caught in the crossfire between the new customers they want to reach and the established ones who served them well in the past. The Bud Light-Dylan Mulvaney case study is case in point.

Bud Light's VP of marketing, Alissa Heinerscheid, was always vocal about her desire to make the brand more inclusive. In a March 30, 2023, podcast, she said she wanted to trade the brand's "fratty" reputation for "inclusivity" (Avarre, 2023). While the mandate is admirable, the manner with which its parent company responded to this issue questions whether this new direction has the buy-in of upper management.

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# Case Study #7: Naomi Osaka's Public (and Private) Approach to Mental Health

By Pruistin Ramadhan, 2024

## Background

Naomi Osaka is a four-time grand slam tennis champion, making her one of the best players the world has ever seen. Owing in large part to her skills and fame, she has gained enormous popularity. However, after receiving overwhelming fame in the media spotlight, she had to deal with mental issues that compromised her play on the court. Although she was obligated to participate in a press conference during the French Open in 2021, Osaka decided to skip it.

The French Open threatened to fine her $15,000 because she declined to participate in any press conferences during the tournament (Suliman, 2021). Other grand slam tournaments then threatened that she could be suspended. Osaka then decided to take a break from tennis to recharge her mental health (Carayol, 2021), a decision that garnered negative media coverage and public criticism.

## Action and Analysis

Naomi Osaka's initial announcement that she did not want to participate in a press conference precipitated a PR crisis. Her initial announcement was criticized by both the media and the public (Carayol, 2021).

After facing a fine and suspension from the French Open, she finally wanted to talk to the media. Osaka's public relations team did a good job, but only after the initial crisis did they finally try to manage it. Her PR team addressed the public, stating that her withdrawal from the French Open was due to her mental health. They had several key actions in response to this crisis. Her PR team's first step was to publicly support Osaka's decision to prioritize her mental health. This action validated Osaka's feelings and PR message.

When crafting their message for the media, her team crafted it for the tournament organizers, as this group had the most interest in the outcome, vaulting them into the position of being Osaka's primary audience. The secondary audience was sponsors, supporters, and Osaka's fellow athletes. And, of course, this was a topic of general interest as the story circulated in mainstream news and social media, as well.

To get her message out, Osaka targeted *Time Magazine*, a major international publication—and arguably the top news magazine in America. She penned an essay with a title that captured both her personal journey and her message to her target audiences: "It's O.K. Not to Be O.K." (Osaka, 2021). This essay earned her the front cover of the magazine, pairing her picture and the words, displayed publicly in front of millions of subscribers, as well as anybody who saw the magazine cover as they shopped.

The encoded slogan-like headline from Osaka's PR team conveyed her key message, which is that people deserve time to care for their mental health. In her *Time* essay, she was transparent about her journey in tennis and her struggle with mental health. First, she apologized for the inconvenience caused by her non-participation and clarified that the press themselves were never the issue, but rather that the traditional format

of the press conference was the issue (Osaka, 2021). Osaka mentioned that she had never been media trained, so the reporters would get what they saw (Osaka, 2021). Osaka's essay then argued how the sports world can improve in the future to support athletes' mental health.

Pressured to disclose her symptoms because the press and the tournament did not believe her (Osaka, 2021), Osaka wanted the press and tournament organizers to be more understanding and humane towards athletes. Osaka listed fellow athletes Michael Phelps, Steph Curry, and Novak Djokovic, as well as Michelle Obama—all household names—who had supported her in her mental health journey (Osaka, 2021). By mentioning these influential people, she gained respect and validity in her response to the crisis. In her closing statement, she continuously thanked everyone who had supported her.

## Lessons from Naomi Osaka's PR Team

Being transparent and acknowledging vulnerability can humanize public figures and make them more relatable to the general public. By taking this approach and supporting their client, Osaka's PR team was able to be ethical in conveying their messages. A mental health need can occur in anyone in any profession. Because the authentic communication made Naomi Osaka more relatable, people empathized with her and understood what she was going through.

The team crafted an authentic message that involved emotions and reasoning towards her departure from the French Open. By connecting the message and the emotions, audiences empathized and saw her as credible and trustworthy. Her PR team partnered with professionals in the mental health field to get the resources that she needed. In her messages, she also educated the tournament organizers and the public about athletes' mental health, letting them know that athletes have the same basic needs as any other person. At the end of the day, Naomi Osaka empowered families to navigate mental health better (Palumbo, 2023). Because of her PR team, Osaka was able to help people who struggle with mental health and she was able to defend and even further her credibility, even rebuilding positive relationships with the media again.

Naomi Osaka became the face of mental health in the sports industry. She advocated for mental health and helped break stigmas surrounding mental health needs in sports. In doing so, she gained trust and respect from the community and the media could change their perspective towards her. By educating the public about the importance of mental health, the tournament organizer and her supporters supported her decision.

## What can be Improved

Naomi Osaka's PR team could have been more proactive in managing the crisis. They could have minimized the negative outcomes by more immediately developing messages that related to Osaka's mental health struggles. There should have been a better communication channel to communicate her struggles with press conferences. There was a miscommunication where the media saw her as the antagonist because she did not want to do any press conferences. There could have been a more open dialogue with the tournament organization so that the issue of fines could have been pre-empted. Naomi Osaka's PR effort could also do more to collaborate with mental health organizations to support her case.

## Conclusion

Because Naomi Osaka's decision to step away from the French Open threatened her career in tennis, her PR team needed a way to connect the client emotionally to a range of audiences. Because her PR team was able to identify who their audiences were, they were able to craft an authentic message that directly spoke to the media and tournament organizer to gain their sympathy. Osaka's personal recovery paralleled her professional recovery and changed the narrative of both the experience of athletes and the need for organizations to account for the mental health needs of their stakeholders.

The PR lesson this story tells is about the success of open, transparent communication and the importance of establishing an authentic emotional connection between a public figure and their audience. And, in the end, Osaka won this PR crisis game, set, and match.

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# Case Study #8: “Almost Naked” Party-Goers Get a Dressing Down

by Tigran Martirosian and Sam Schechter, 2024

## Walking through the Wrong Door

“In the life of every person comes a moment when he walks through a wrong door,” said Philipp Kirkorov, one of Russia’s prominent pop artists, who attended the now-infamous “Almost-Naked Party” in nothing but a glittery see-through jumpsuit and underpants. These words perfectly described the pall of tearful apologies, annulled sponsorships, and brief jail sentences that these almost naked party-goers experienced.

Celebrity influencer and television personality Anastasia Ivleyeva invited the elites of Russian pop culture to a themed “almost-naked” party on December 20th, 2023, at the Mutabor Club in Moscow (Jankowicz, 2023), with tickets reportedly costing a million rubles each (approximately US $11,000) (Meduza, 2023).

The event drew attendees from diverse backgrounds, featuring public figures known for shaping cultural opinions for decades. Each of these figures had a prominent spotlight in Russian pop culture. The scantily-clad stars wore flesh-colored mesh, lace, lingerie, or even less (Sauer, 2023). Ksenia Sobchak, rumored to be President Vladimir Putin’s goddaughter, was also in attendance (Sauer, 2023).

However, a new red line was unwittingly crossed, as the raunchy celebrity-studded party prompted outrage among conservative Russian audiences. Waking up with a hangover–of the worst political kind—is how some of Russia’s top celebrities started the New Year.

This came at a critical time for Russia, just as the nation approached the two-year mark of its military campaign in Ukraine and faced a presidential vote in March, 2024. Russia’s crusaders for traditional values found a new battleground, and nudity of all kinds became a target (Hartog, 2024). The party prompted Yekaterina Mizulina, the ultra-patriotic head of the Safe Internet League, a pseudo-NGO, to call it “a cynical act … at a time when our men are dying in the special military operation, and many children are losing their fathers” (para.8).

The situation was unprecedented, but the blowback was immediate and severe. Pro-Kremlin bloggers, state media, and Orthodox Christian groups led a fierce backlash that dominated headlines for days (Osborne, 2023). Following the event, at least six participants publicly apologized, expressing regrets and/or implausible defenses.

Maria Zakharova, a Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson, said that the event “stained” the participants, but offered an opportunity to party-goers to reflect and improve themselves (Osborne, 2023). As the conservative outrage piled up, police raided Mutabor Club on December 21st, 2023 (Hartog, 2024).

## Celebrity Scandal, Response, and Consequences

In the public relations aftermath, some party-goers made strategic communications decisions towards maintaining their previously trusting relationships with audiences, while others made terrible decisions. Either

through skill or folly, all of these individuals showcased the importance of trustworthy public relations and protecting and restoring one's reputation.

To start with, Anastasia Ivleyeva, who had 18 million Instagram followers, said the event was the premiere of her photography project, originally commissioned by the local branch of Playboy magazine (Hartog, 2024). She said the dress code was "almost naked" and that guests were given the freedom to interpret that as they saw fit.

No doubt true, but she could have anticipated controversy and avoided some of these potential outcomes by, for instance, asking attendees not to film the event. And, once the controversy erupted, Ivleyeva counterproductively took a defensive stance. "It was just beautiful people in beautiful outfits, half-naked. When we look at beautiful, slender models in the West, we say, 'D**n, they're so beautiful, they're so cool.' And our beautiful, fit artists go out, and everyone is like, 'F***, how could they! Showbiz has gone downhill'," she wrote the day after the party (later deleting the post) (Meduza, 2023). The response failed to understand the backlash, escalating the audience's dissatisfaction.

Within days, partygoers began issuing public apologies for attending the event. One of the first to do so, on December 24th, was Ivleyeva herself, promising to donate the proceeds from ticket sales to charitable causes. However, because Ivleyeva did not specify which charitable causes, audiences questioned the legitimacy, transparency, and authenticity of the apology. Soon after, Russia's largest mobile network operator, MTS, removed Ivleyeva from its list of brand ambassadors, while one of the largest banks, Tinkoff, ended its contract with her.

On December 21st, Russian television anchor and journalist Ksenia Sobchak, who attended the party, issued a half-hearted apology with some mixed messaging (Borisenko, 2023). However, the audience was not accepting half-hearted apologies. Because of her public profile, Sobchak was under enormous pressure from government leaders. On December 26th, Sobchak issued a new, more complete and direct apology. Her initial comments and subsequent apology can be seen as a response to the pressure on her, which showcases the Kremlin's influence over media and public individuals during critical events.

For Philipp Kirkorov, pressure came publicly and directly from President Putin's press secretary. Kirkorov responded by downplaying his motivations and lying about how long he attended the party (which was promptly exposed as a lie) (Borisenko, 2023). The rationale behind such an attempt falls short, considering the undeniable evidence presented through photographs and videos, revealing a full evening of partying that is not even close to Kirkorov's original "dropped in for five minutes" claim (Russia Television, 2023).

Kirkorov's self-inflicted wound underscores a crucial lesson for the realm of public relations: in a digital media landscape with constant photo and video sharing, anonymity and privacy are antiquated notions. While this person's attempt to reduce the scale of anger by lying to society might have provided some help for the first couple of days, the collapse of his self-excuse was inevitable, worsening the relationship with the audience and the damage to himself.

Promptly, Kirkorov's image was removed from advertising for a New Year's comedy show and other New Year's events were edited to remove images of Kirkorov (Ilyinsky, 2023), representing a significant attack to his personal brand.

Another implicated figure was popular singer, Dima Bilan, who posted a video on Instagram on December 26th, in which he also tried to justify the outfits of party attendees. "I knew about the dress code, but everyone had their own understanding of what that meant. Attending events is part of my profession. It's my job. I couldn't have known in advance what other people would wear. I can only be accountable for myself," he said (Borisenko, 2023). Bilan's stance aimed to reinforce his integrity, connecting his behaviour to a professional ethic. In this

way, he was more successful than other attendees, as some saw this as a valid argument and not so much of a deflection of responsibility.

On December 22nd, singer and actor Lolita Milyavskaya defended the party: “This organized hate from out of the blue made me laugh. The party was ironic, not about sex, otherwise, you know, they wouldn’t have invited 60-year-olds” (Borisenko, 2023). However, with the backlash intensifying, three days later, the singer completely changed her tune, acknowledging error and taking responsibility (Borisenko, 2023).

The immediate move of other artists towards public apologies indicated a recognition of the event’s misalignment with public sentiment and the reigning political context (Borisenko, 2023).

However, the most significant case was that of rap artist Vacio, legally known as Nikolai Vasilyev, who faced legal consequences for his attire at the event. Going to the party wearing only a single white sock to cover his genitals, an homage to the famous 1987 Red Hot Chili Peppers album cover (Sauer, 2023), Vasilyev was sentenced to 15 days in prison for “disorderly conduct” and was fined 200,000 rubles (approximately US $2,200) (Al Jazeera, 2023).

The arrest of Vasilyev and charges pressed against Ivleyeva were seen as part of a wider Kremlin crackdown on LGBT+ rights across Russia (Sarkar, 2023). Beyond the fact he had apologized, there was a twist to this story: so-called Easter eggs referencing the situation were included in Vasilyev’s new video demonstrating “10 ways to destroy a Balenciaga sock” (Sablin, 2024), a form of protest often appreciated among rap enthusiasts. Despite the Easter eggs, Vasilyev publicly bowed to external pressure and aligned his public statements with apologies from other attendees. Shortly thereafter, Vasilyev was drafted into the Russian military and his jail sentence was extended by an additional 10 days (Hartog, 2024). Apparently, the wrong audience found the Easter eggs.

## Learning Points

The PR strategies employed by the celebrities in response to the backlash from the “Almost-Naked Party” varied in effectiveness. While the initial reactions were met with criticism for their apparent insensitivity, the follow-up apologies and clarifications helped to soften the public’s stance and restore some degree of public trust, though the celebrities themselves were clearly less sincere and apologetic because of the controversy, rather than their actual behaviour.

The “almost naked” case study offers a range of important learning takeaways:

- Even when in a critical situation, communicators need to recognize the responsibilities audiences perceive as being owed to them.
- The immediacy of apologies illustrated that timing can be everything in PR. An apology that is too slow to be delivered undermines its perceived sincerity. On the other hand, an apology that is issued too quickly can seem equally insincere, as if no meaningful reflection took place.
- Communicators should never lie to the audience. The lies are too likely to fail and the consequences are too severe. Even if other parts of the defense are true and even if the personal conduct should be seen as acceptable, the lie will taint everything else.
- For individuals of high social status, personal brand is closely linked to public behaviour. Mistakes in social settings can lead to drastic personal brand damage.
- Humour needs to be used carefully. Even when witty or poignant, current events may make its application unpalatable to audiences. Public speakers need to be able to “read the room” when they offer their comments.

- If there is no key message a communicator needs to deliver, the best approach is to default to the expectations of the audience, meeting those to protect a brand and/or relationship so that future messages have a better chance of landing.
- Cultural and political contexts must be recognized. Statements and behaviours that are usually seen as acceptable—even if minimally so—can be judged unacceptable—and harshly so—depending on the cultural and political context of the moment.
- Openly framing comments within the principles being embraced helps audiences to understand those values and connect them within the context of the moment. A statement that appears principled, even if not aligned with the audience's own mood, will be better received than a statement that is received as unprincipled.

Political and cultural contexts can vary intensely by country, epoch, and other variable factors. In this case, many social media users applauded the government's crackdown on the behaviours exhibited at the party. On the other hand, others expressed more moderate sentiments, perhaps best captured by this quote from a Moscovite commenting on social media: "Those who attended had not broken any law and were free to do as they pleased at what was a private event" (Osborne, 2023).

With such a split in public opinion, communication needs to be strategic to secure positive—or at least neutral—public perceptions. Aligning communications with the audience's demands can reduce the intensity and longevity of the crisis, maintain public trust, and ultimately help to navigate the controversy with integrity and a focus on the long-term outcomes of the crisis.

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# Case Study #9: Entergy Responds to Hurricane Katrina

Entergy is a large-scale utility operating primarily along the Gulf Coast of the United States. In the late summer and early fall of 2005, Entergy weathered the two worst hurricanes in the company's history within the same 26-day period: Hurricanes Katrina and Rita (B[1].

The one-two punch of these powerful storms devastated the region served by Entergy. Almost two million homes and businesses lost power during the height of the storms' wrath. Dozens of Entergy power generation plants were forced to close and thousands of miles of transmission and distribution lines were downed. In all, more than 1,700 structures and 28,892 utility poles were destroyed or damaged by the storms. It was devastation without precedent in modern times.

## Crisis on Top of Crisis

For the communication team at Entergy, the crisis caused by Katrina and Rita was more severe than any they had ever experienced. The pressure to communicate quickly with Entergy employees, customers, communities, and other audiences was intense. To add to this pressure, members of the communication team had themselves suffered losses from the storms. While they grappled with how to get their jobs done, they were also trying to cope with the loss of their own homes and the impact the hurricanes had caused in their own personal lives.

Arthur Wiese, Jr., Entergy's vice president of corporate communications, noted that "major storms are more than just an operational crisis for a utility company. They also pose major communications hurdles, directly impacting corporate reputation and the company's relationship with its employees, its shareholders, and its customers."

In Entergy's headquarters city, New Orleans, the damage was catastrophic. Thousands were dead or missing; tens of thousands were homeless. Electrical power was virtually nonexistent; the gas distribution system was inundated with corrosive saltwater; 1,500 displaced Entergy employees were scattered across the nation—from Los Angeles to Boston—after the company's evacuation on August 27. It was hard to know where to begin.

In the hours after the winds subsided and the scope of the damage became clear, Entergy faced multiple challenges. The company had to assemble the largest restoration workforce in its history to safely begin repairing the worst damage ever incurred to its system. To do this, Entergy had to address the logistical needs of its workers, providing a constant supply of food, water, and medication. It had to find shelter for the workforce, many of whom had lost homes. Entergy improvised a system to get workers their paychecks and to communicate with them in the absence of cell service, computers, and other traditional channels. In addition to meeting these basic human needs, Entergy needed to continue to manage its business, despite the fact that its corporate headquarters was shut down.

1. ased on Entergy company documents, interviews with Art Wiese, 2009, and Entergy, 2009)

## Preparation Makes the Difference

The communication team had actually begun preparing for Katrina long before the storm hit. As Katrina began bearing down on New Orleans, Entergy activated its system command center in Jackson, Mississippi, and moved a multidisciplinary team there on August 27, which was two days before Katrina made landfall. The command structure included additional transmission centers in Jackson and New Orleans, and distribution operations centers at utility operations headquarters in Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, and Arkansas.

At these headquarters, personnel began coordinating preparation efforts, recruiting outside restoration help through mutual assistance agreements with other utilities, and lined up safe staging areas for materials and crews. Additionally, customers and crews in the anticipated impact zone were put on alert, as arrangements were being made to support the lodging of crews once the restoration began.

The company had learned some valuable lessons in the aftermath of Hurricane Ivan, which had struck its service area the previous year. Hurricane Ivan was the strongest hurricane of the 2004 Atlantic hurricane season and it forced Entergy to mount a full company evacuation, which had not been done before. Employees were confused about their own responsibilities during the evacuation versus those that belonged to the company. For example, Ivan demonstrated the limits on the company's ability to provide evacuation lodging, which many employees had been expecting. Through the experience with Ivan, Entergy learned the importance of communicating clearly with employees about the differences between the company's responsibilities and the individual's responsibilities in a catastrophe.

Entergy assembled a cross-functional team in the spring of 2005 to address the lessons learned from the Ivan evacuation. The team found several key areas that posed problems for the company. The past practice of individual business units independently implementing evacuation policies resulted in chaos, including internal competition for lodging. Many employees did not fully appreciate the potential danger of a major hurricane, since the area had not experienced a direct strike in decades.

## Pro-Active Communications Planning and Training

The communications team targeted these areas of confusion and implemented a new communications plan. The goal was to educate employees on the company's new evacuation policies and procedures and to provide them with information to help them prepare their own individual hurricane evacuation plans. This approach emphasized the severity of the danger posed by a major hurricane and the need to plan ahead. The company needed to explain why it was implementing more consistent storm policies, and how these changes would help Entergy's ability to implement the storm restoration plan for customers.

Communication began with supervisors, who were sent talking points and an overview of materials that would be mailed to employees in June, 2005. They were also invited to attend a webcast that provided an overview of the changes and an opportunity to ask questions. These supervisors were asked to meet with their employees within two weeks to explain these changes and to distribute a communications packet outlining the new procedures.

The communications team also developed a new website titled "IEStormNet." This website was designed to communicate important information before, during, and after a natural disaster. This site was made available to both employees and their families and promotional fliers were distributed that highlighted the information available through the site.

## Preparing Customers for a Crisis

Entergy also wanted to make sure its customers were better prepared. In May, 2005, Entergy constructed a corporate communications plan that aimed to help customers better appreciate the challenges it would face in restoring service in the event of a major storm. Ivan had demonstrated how difficult it would be for Entergy to restore service quickly and the company wanted customers to better understand the challenges it would face in getting them back on line. Although Ivan was a serious storm, the company had no idea at the time just how bad the 2005 hurricane season would be.

## Crisis in the Air; Response on the Ground

On August 29th, Katrina made landfall near New Orleans. Approximately 1,500 Entergy employees were forced to evacuate. They were scattered across the nation and hard to reach since cell phone circuits were overrun and conventional telephone service was wiped out.

The company had to utilize other methods to locate, mobilize, and inform the large restoration workforce. Entergy CEO J. Wayne Leonard sent out daily e-mails to over 14,000 employees, including those unaffected by the storm. An employee information line was kept up to date with recorded messages and detailed information. The recently created IEStormNet produced daily online newsletters, which were also printed and distributed at crew staging sites. Entergy posted toll free numbers on its website and broadcast public service announcements on the radio asking employees to call in for information.

Maintaining employee morale during the restoration process was a major objective. Many employees had lost family members and friends to the storm. Their homes and possessions were damaged or destroyed by the winds and flood waters. These same people were being asked to work 18-hour shifts in hot, humid conditions, surrounded by unimaginable tragedy and destruction.

Slowly, conditions for the restoration force began to improve. By September 7th, the company had set up tent cities in seven locations throughout Louisiana and Mississippi, equipped with cots, food, water, and medical supplies for all of its workers. Entergy continued to pay workers until it found them jobs within the firm because it recognized the need to offer devastated employees incentives to come back to work.

Entergy CEO Leonard posted letters on IEStormNet and asked for supervisors to deliver them to crews at campsites and even in remote areas where they were working. These letters focused on the progress of the restoration efforts. In one letter, just days after Katrina hit, Leonard wrote, “Please work safely and know that this organization of caring people is working night and day to help you pull your life back together” ([2]

## Putting People First

Just days after Katrina, Entergy established the “Power of Hope Fund,” which aimed to help employees and customers rebuild their lives after the storms, with an initial corporate investment of $1 million. To spread news of the Power of Hope Fund, Entergy embarked on a two-week media campaign and spread the word via

2. IEStormNet Update, 2006).

television, radio, print, and the internet. Over the period of a few months, the fund received over $4 million in donations from around the world.

Entergy also established *Operation ReSTORE Hope*. This project had both distribution centers and a virtual store where people could donate clothes, furniture, and household supplies for employees. Entergy employee-volunteers and retirees staffed the distribution centers, which benefited more than 2,000 employees whose lives had been affected by the hurricanes.

The company provided redeployment coordinators in each major hub where displaced employees and their families would be relocating. These coordinators helped displaced employees and their families make a smooth transition to new work locations. They helped to provide valuable information on schools, neighborhoods, churches, local services, and resources available in the area.

## Crisis on Top of Crisis

Only 26 days after Katrina, just as restoration was beginning to take hold, Hurricane Rita made landfall on September 24th as a Category 3 hurricane near the mouth of the Sabine River on the Texas-Louisiana border. Rita caused even greater damage to Entergy's transmission system, severing the ties between generating plants and customers, and plunging the area from Conroe, Texas, to Jennings, Louisiana, into darkness. Over 400 substations were knocked out of service. Rita brought damaging winds to the territory of all five utility subsidiaries in the Entergy system and interrupted service to over 750,000 customers. This second storm further complicated Entergy's efforts to restore service to customers, care for the human needs of its employees, and maintain its viability as a public company.

## Media as an Ally

Throughout the Katrina and Rita restoration, Entergy made every effort to maintain a mutually beneficial relationship with the media. Winning the media's support was critical to winning the support of public officials and Wall Street. Through past experience, the company had come to understand that the media's perceptions would be shaped in large measure by how well Entergy took care of its employees and customers.

Entergy used a strategy it called "One Voice" to work with the media. This strategy was effective in keeping the messages coming from all company representatives consistent and accurate during the restoration, thus minimizing any confusion about progress.

To achieve this objective, the company gave all company spokespersons, including the 45 communicators in its corporate communications department who were working on the storm restoration effort, the same sets of talking points up to four times a day to keep them informed. Entergy issued over 50 news releases and held multiple news conferences and media conference calls throughout the restoration.

Communication officials produced and managed over 40,000 radio ads, 15,000 television ads, and 700 newspaper ads. They participated in more than 300 conference calls or meetings and held dozens of coordination calls of its own to ensure the proper coordination of all messages being dispersed, both internally and externally ([3]

3. Entergy, 2005).

Reporters were looking for complete access and unique story angles regarding Entergy's restoration process. The media had been highly critical of the government's response to Katrina at the federal, state, and local levels. Entergy thus had to deal with individuals who were already skeptical of how the situation was being managed.

Using its "one voice" strategy, Entergy opened up its doors to the media. The company aggressively pushed its story with reporters and did virtually every interview that was requested. The company invited reporters to tour the command center and even to visit crews in the field. When Entergy used helicopters to assess the damage, a seat was usually reserved for a photographer or journalist.

Such transparency affected how the public and the government perceived Energy's restoration efforts by making available a steady flow of information to media outlets. The resulting media exposure in many cases boosted employee moral by projecting Entergy's workers as heroes.

## Business Model Impact

After Katrina, Entergy New Orleans, Inc. (ENO), the smallest of Entergy's subsidiary companies, not only faced major damages to its infrastructure, but also a drastic reduction to its customer base in the city. Almost two months after Katrina, only 24% of Entergy's New Orleans customers had returned.

To protect its customers from drastic rate increases and to ensure continued progress in restoring power and gas service to New Orleans, Entergy Corporation filed a voluntary petition for bankruptcy reorganization on September 23, 2005. It also asked for federal funding to alleviate its financial situation.

Entergy faced opposition from the Bush Administration when asking for this federal funding. ENO had hoped to be included in a $17.1 billion package passed by Congress in October, 2005, for Katrina relief, but the request was denied. In the administration's view, federal aid for damage incurred in natural disasters rarely goes to private, for-profit companies such as Entergy. A long, bitter public struggle ensued over getting federal assistance that would enable ENO to limit rate hikes to its customers in New Orleans. By November, 2006, some federal funding began to appear. However, rate hikes for ENO customers were inevitable.

When funding from the federal government was in question, Entergy made predictions in June, 2006, that they would have to increase utility rates for its customers by 25%. However, by October, 2006, the Louisiana Recovery Authority had approved block grants the company sought to obtain with the Chapter 11 "Ethics, Leadership and Counseling, and Moral Analyses" filing. At the same time, improving conditions in the city had contributed to faster population growth. These factors led to a much more modest rate increase of 7.5%. Built into the rate increase was a plan to create a $75 million storm reserve for future hurricanes ([4]

## Lessons Learned

Entergy has learned a number of lessons from the Katrina and Rita restoration that have aided in the further development of its disaster response protocol. The company better understands that employees are its most important audience, surpassing even customers. If employees do not perform, company messages to other

4. IEStormNet Update, Entergy, 2006).

audiences are diminished. Entergy has also learned that it must anticipate significant emotional strain with its employees when they are faced with such difficult personal impacts.

As a company, Entergy was reminded of the importance of having detailed operational, communications, and business continuity plans and learned that they should conduct frequent drills to test these plans. When a major storm is approaching, communicators must move to a pre-equipped command center quickly.

Entergy also learned the importance of making its own evacuation decisions and not relying solely on the government. In reacting to the approach of Katrina, Entergy got a head start in relocating its hurricane command center—and ultimately its whole headquarters—to Jackson, Mississippi. This decision proved to be pivotal in allowing the restoration process to begin as quickly and effectively as possible.

Entergy also learned the value of having backup communication tactics with IEStormNet. When conventional communication systems were down, this internal website helped Entergy and its employees communicate much more effectively.

Finally, the company learned the importance of taking calculated risks, especially in dealing with the media. By opening its doors to the media and demonstrating the tangible steps it was taking with both employees and customers, Entergy was able to restore trust that had been damaged in the immediate aftermath of the storm. The focus on "one voice," the accessibility of key executives, and the recognition that its employees were the most critical public for communication all enabled Entergy to emerge from the chaos of Katrina and Rita and regain its footing as a profitable and sustainable organization.

## Attributions

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# Case Study #10: Purdue Pharma and the Opioid Crisis

By Lina Moskaleva, 2022

## Background

Up until the mid-1990s, prescription opioid drugs were prescribed by medical professionals with extreme caution and only to patients with cancer and other terminal illnesses due to the potential for opioid abuse and addition (Marks 2020). This posed a problem for pharmaceutical companies, such as Purdue Pharma, because it curbed their sales of opioid medications by limiting the patient market, the length of time for the prescription, and the level of dose prescribed. The focus of this case study is Purdue Pharma's pro-opioid campaign in the United States, from 1995 to the early 2000s.

## Goals and Strategies

Purdue Pharma's goal was to increase their sales of opioid medications, in particular OxyContin. Their objective was to expand the market of patients using opioids and encourage the prescription of opioids for longer periods of time and at higher doses. They aimed to do this by downplaying the risks of addiction and stigmatizing those who became addicted and the doctors who raised concerns (Marks, 2020).

The strategy for Purdue Pharma was to change the public, political, and medical discourse about prescription opioid drugs. The campaign began in 1996, when OxyContin was created, and involved a multitude of tactics.

## Messaging

In 1995, with permission from the US Food and Drug Administration, Purdue Pharma made an unsubstantiated claim that OxyContin's novel slow-release formulation was less appealing to drug abusers (Meier, 2018). This claim helped OxyContin's popularity until it became apparent by the early 2000s that the drug was just as easy to abuse as other painkillers.

In order to humanize their brand and expand their market, Purdue claimed that their product helped "the untreated patient in severe pain who is mobilized and given his life back" (Chakradhar & Ross, 2019).

Lastly, in an internal company email from 2001, the owner of Purdue Pharma wrote "We have to hammer on the abusers in every way possible… They are the culprits and the problem. They are reckless criminals" (Joseph, 2019). This email exemplified another message for the public; "regular people don't abuse OxyContin, only criminals and long-term drug addicts do."

## Using Opinion Leaders

Purdue Pharma created "webs of influence" by building relationships with a variety of stakeholders, including physicians, civil society groups, and research universities (Marks, 2020). These groups are opinion leaders to a majority of the public and so they helped Purdue to effectively disseminate their message.

One node of the web was the medical community, which was influenced through pharmaceutical representatives and promotional events. Perdue Pharma's representatives distributed informational materials (literature, audiotapes, brochures, and videotapes) and gifts to the physicians. Jonathan Marks (2020) noted that physicians who met with Purdue reps were 10 times more likely to have a patient die of a prescription opioid overdose. Further, between 1996 and 2001, Purdue conducted more than 40 national pain-management conferences attended by medical professionals (Van Zee, 2009). Lastly, on at least one occasion, Purdue hired an opinion leader to speak to hospital staff about addiction (Armstrong, 2019).

The medical research and education field made up the next node. Purdue's infiltration of the field was described in a STAT News article (2019). In 1999, the owners of Purdue helped to start a graduate program at Tufts University in Pain Research, Education, and Policy. As well, Tufts University School of Medicine received millions in funding from the Purdue owners and hired a Purdue staff member as an adjunct associate professor to give lectures about pain and opioid use (Joseph, 2019). In 2002, the company helped to create the Massachusetts General Hospital Purdue Pharma Pain Program.

Another node was civil society groups, such as patient advocacy organizations (PAOs), professional societies, and other health-related NGOs. Purdue funded groups included the Academy of Integrative Pain Management and the American Pain Society. These groups are important because they represent the interests of medical professionals and patients in the policymaking processes. However, no matter how earnest the groups are, donations influence them to act in ways aligned with the interests of the major donors (Marks, 2020).

## Influencing the Public through Media

The larger public became exposed to Purdue's message through the media. Purdue funded think tanks used for expert commentary, aided the creation of positive articles, without affiliation disclosure, and deterred or challenged negative coverage of their product or actions (Armstrong, 2019).

David Armstrong's article (2019) details the work of Sally Satel, a psychiatrist who had worked for a Purdue-funded organization. Later, Satel would work directly with Purdue after being recruited by their PR company, Dezenhall Resources. Satel had several pro-opioid articles published in some of the country's biggest news media publications, such as *The New York Times*. In one article, she blamed concerned people for having "opiophobia."

To help increase the exposure to their message, Purdue created a website, "In the Face of Pain," which encouraged patients to "overcome" their "concerns about addiction" (Massachusetts v. Purdue, 2019). Testimonials of alleged personal experiences on the website were written by Purdue consultants (Massachusetts v. Purdue, 2019).

## Outcomes

The campaign's success can be measured by the sales of the drug and the market composition following the campaign. Purdue Pharma's sales of OxyContin increased by almost 10 times between 1997 and 2002, and, by 1999, patients with non–cancer-related pain accounted for 86% of the total opioid market (Van Zee, 2009).

## Evaluation

Purdue Pharma's campaign helped them achieve their goal of increasing opioid sales, as evidenced by the outcomes. From a PR perspective, the campaign was successful because they set their objective for expanding their market, researched their audiences (high-prescribing doctors, civic groups needing funding, agreeable universities), built relationships with stakeholders, used opinion leaders, and ultimately changed the narrative about their product.

## Consequences

In 2007, Purdue Pharma pleaded guilty for "misbranding" OxyContin (Meier, 2018) and, in 2020, made a settlement of $8.3 billion in a case with the US Department of Justice for their role in the opioid crisis. The company has stopped its practice of promoting sales through sales representatives (Purdue Pharma, n.d.).

## Key Learning Points

What PR professionals can learn from this case study is the power of strategically funding and recruiting opinion leaders to spread a message. Critically, Purdue Pharma used a variety of opinion leaders who would be trusted by the government, the medical community, and the general public, which increased the credibility of their message. The audience is naturally skeptical of the message when delivered by an entity that stands to benefit from the audience believing it. However, opinion leaders who are perceived to be impartial are interpreted as being genuine and trustworthy, thereby making the audience more likely to accept the message.

However, this takeaway needs to be qualified by emphasizing that Purdue's success was largely achieved by deliberately misinforming their audiences and using aggressive and unethical marketing strategies. Purdue succeeded in creating harmful, but lucrative, narratives about opioids and opioid abuse, which have stuck with the public and shaped the opioid crisis for the worse.

While the campaign achieved its goals in the short-term, the ethically problematic behaviour—which should be seen as especially troubling in a field that demands strict adherence to ethical codes—was catastrophic to the company in the long-run.

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# Case Study #13: Nespresso Coffee Pods and Corporate Greenwashing

by April Jordan, 2018

Nespresso is a company that has made disposable aluminum coffee pods since 1986 and operates in over 60 countries (Nespresso, n.d.). Nespresso's product allows consumers to easily make espresso using specialty coffee makers and single-use coffee pods (n.d.). Through various methods and with varying degrees of success, Nespresso attempts to brand itself as an environmentally-conscious company. Since 2015, the company has been pushing to implement convenient worldwide recycling programs and convince the public to feel good about using the recyclable pods (n.d.).

Nespresso published videos on YouTube and TV about their recycling program that were aimed towards English-speaking Western countries, such as Australia and the United States. They powered up their combined marketing and public relations efforts to amplify this pro-recycling message. YouTube videos and TV ads seem to be the primary delivery method for these public relations and marketing campaigns. Their video titled Nespresso Capsule Recycling Program USA (Nespresso, 2015) best encapsulates the company's PR efforts regarding recycling the pods because. Interestingly, the PR campaign has no flashy hashtag or slogan attached to it and is not glamourous in any way, while the related marketing campaign has those features.

Nespresso's recycling PR videos are generally unstylish. In the previously mentioned video, the founder and president of one pod recycling plant appears on screen to narrate part of the video, but does not appear to be a polished speaker. In contrast, Nespresso's high-glamour marketing campaigns about recycling involve celebrity George Clooney. The two different approaches are noteworthy, insofar as the marketing approach would doubtlessly have a higher reach and impact, while the PR videos may well be more for to establish their bona fide intentions and for inoculation against allegations of environmental wrongdoing than for actual distribution.

Involving George Clooney, a known humanitarian (Inside Philanthropy, 2017), in Nespresso's recent marketing over the last year is calculated and, one must assume, meant to springboard off the earlier public relations efforts. The combination of the un-glamourous recycling plants, followed by later marketing videos of Clooney suggests Nespresso first wanted to convince high-information stakeholders that Nespresso is truly committed to making a difference. They then drive home the pretty, feel-good idea of being part of saving the planet through recycling, just like good-guy George Clooney. That latter campaign would be aimed at low-information consumers and designed to also amplify the previous message to high-information stakeholders.

Unfortunately for Nespresso, there were many challenges working against the PR campaign. Mainly, people already thought coffee pods were bad for the environment (BBC News, 2016) and Nespresso is owned by Nestle, a company whose reputation has been attacked for disregarding human rights (McGraw, 2017).

Perhaps the only factor working in Nespresso's favour for this recycling campaign was that other major coffee pod brands are much more difficult to recycle (Gunther, 2015). Consumers must do much of the work to recycle plastic pods, whereas Nespresso only asks their consumers to return the pods to a drop-off point or fill a special bag with the pods, then put them in the regular recycling bin (Recycling Process, n.d.). This is a major benefit for consumers and looks like a genuine effort by Nespresso to reduce the environmental impact of their pods.

The resounding consensus in online comments sections and articles is that, while Nespresso pods are not good for the environment, at least they are easy to recycle and are not as bad as the plastic pods, which are sent straight to landfills. However, news outlets and environmentally-focused blogs have generally given balanced pro/con articles for Nespresso's pods, sometimes even leaning towards positive attitudes, with coverage such as "Nespresso Bid to Recycle Coffee Pods" (Smithers, 2017).

Comments on the Nespresso recycling videos are generally positive; some commenters even claim they switched to Nespresso because of their recycling programs. Other Nespresso campaigns do not always receive such accolades, as evidenced by comments on "The Choices We Make" (2017).

After examining Nespresso's campaign to improve public opinion around the environmental impacts of their pods, there are a few main takeaways for public relations practitioners. First, Nespresso effectively used visuals to create emotion for the audience. A company must do more than say they are committed to a cause. They must show this to the audience and make them feel that this is true. This could mean depicting a scene that is less visually appealing than what the company usually shows if it creates an honest feeling.

Second, PR and marketing efforts are often laddered and intertwined in the effort to steer public opinion. While different and distinct, the two can be very successfully scaffolded.

Lastly, to shift an opinion, a brand must make a genuine effort towards the cause in question and must convey the message in a way the audience is willing to accept (lest the company be skewered in the media). The Nespresso PR campaign was successful because Nespresso simultaneously made a worldwide effort to be the most conveniently recyclable coffee pod company and launched an authentic-looking two-part campaign at the same time. In the minds of some consumers, the Nespresso coffee pods are an environmentally-friendly product, which is the desired outcome for any greenwashing campaign.

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# Case Study #14: Bernie Sanders' Media Blackout

By Melissa White and Erin Relland, 2017

## Background

Leading up to the 2016 US presidential election, Hillary Clinton seemed to be the prohibitive favourite for the Democratic nomination, but a charismatic semi-independent senator from Vermont was creating an impressive challenge to Clinton's presumed coronation: Bernie Sanders. Where Clinton was conservative and played a frontrunner's campaign strategy, Sanders was unconventional and radical (by American standards). The result was a legitimate two-way race for the Democratic nomination.

Meanwhile, a heavily crowded Republican field with no clear frontrunner was being disrupted (if not dominated) by a man who had never held political office: business mogul Donald Trump. His campaign was also unconventional, perhaps most noted for its irreverent tone and borderline fascist policy proposals.

The Trump and Sanders campaigns disrupted a long-standing conservatism about how to approach presidential elections.

## Unequal Media Treatment

On August 15, 2015, Bernie Sanders' Los Angeles rally attracted 27,500 supporters, but only the Washington Post, The Hill, and NBC Los Angeles covered it (O'Keefe & Wagner, 2015; Easley, 2015; Zhang and Har, 2015). Hillary Clinton's largest crowd at that point had been 5,500 people (O'Keefe & Wagner, 2015).

On March 15, 2016, Sanders spoke to an enthusiastic crowd of thousands in Arizona for nearly an hour, but Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC did not carry the speech because they were "standing by for Trump" (Blow, 2016, para. 1-3).

Why was there a lack of network news coverage of Sanders' rallies? While the size of his rallies made him worth covering, Bernie Sanders' campaign received significantly less coverage than Hillary Clinton's and Donald Trump's for two main reasons: Trump's popularity and ability to earn media and Sanders' unwillingness to engage in the media's "contest of personalities" (Tyndall, 2017, para. 2).

First, let's look at the numbers. Figure 1 shows a comparison between the news coverage received by the top three candidates on ABC, CBS, and NBC during the 2016 presidential election compared to the coverage received by the top three candidates in the last non-incumbent race in 2008.

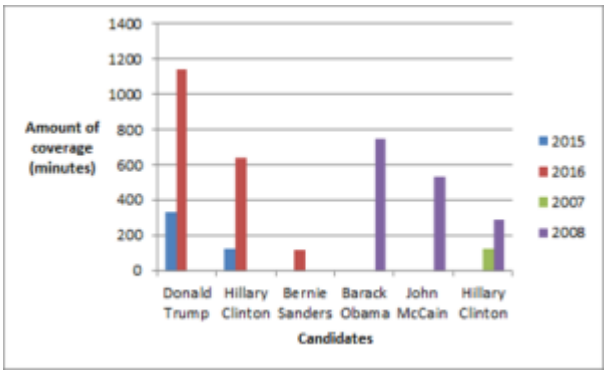



*Figure 1: Comparison of candidates' media coverage on ABC, CBS, and NBC in the 2016 and 2008 elections (Tyndall, 2016; Tyndall, 2008)*

This data shows that not only did the 2016 presidential election receive more ABC, CBC, and NBC coverage than the 2008 election, but Trump and Clinton received a much larger portion of the coverage than Sanders. The 2008 data also shows that this particular media bias is not the norm: Clinton not only received more coverage in 2008 than Sanders did in 2016, but she received a larger percentage of the coverage in 2008 (Tyndall, 2016; Tyndall, 2008).

This disparity in coverage extends to newsstands: Margaret Sullivan, editor of the New York Times, conceded that, in August, 2015, the Times ran 63 articles on Trump, 54 on Clinton, and only 14 articles on Sanders (2015). In this respect, however, Sanders' Times coverage was similar to that received by non-Trump Republican nominees (Sullivan, 2015).

## Media Disparity Explained

One reason for the disparity between the three candidates is Trump's ability to earn media: as of March, 2016, mediaQuant reported that Trump had spent only $10 million on ads, but earned almost $2 billion in media (Confessore & Yourish, 2016). Compare that to the $746 million Clinton earned and the $28 million Sanders earned (Confessore & Yourish, 2016). Since Trump initially was not leading in the polls or raising much money, two indicators to journalists that a candidate is worth covering, he attracted journalists by being unconventional, sensational, and "the type of story material that will catch and hold an audience's attention" (Patterson, 2016, para. 16).

Because of Trump's popularity, the Democratic primary received less than half as much news coverage as the Republican primary (Patterson, 2016). Clinton also went into the election with a media following: the New York Times, for example, had a reporter covering her full-time starting in 2013 (Sullivan, 2015). Networks also initially believed that Clinton would be more successful (Democracy Now, 2016). This environment made gaining name recognition very difficult for Sanders. For a candidate with "no money, no organization, and no national following," Sanders needed his name to circulate so that voters would know who he was. He would need to rise in the polls for the media would see him as a candidate worthy of coverage (Patterson, 2016, para. 37; Lauter, 2016).

Furthermore, in the 2016 presidential election, name recognition seemed to be more important than whether the coverage was positive or negative. As Figure 2 shows, Sanders received the most positive issue coverage of the top four candidates (Media Tenor, 2016). The tone of his coverage was also much more positive than the tone of Clinton's coverage (Patterson, 2016). But the small amount of positive coverage he received did not make up for the fact that his name recognition was low. Name recognition influences campaigns: with a lack of media coverage, a candidate's name will circulate less and voters will be less likely to choose the candidate (Lauter, 2016).

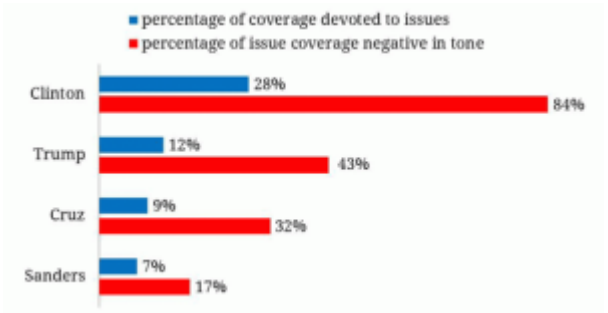



*Figure 2: "Volume and tone of top candidates' issue coverage" (Media Tenor, 2015)*

Another reason for Sanders' lack of media coverage was his determination to prevent personality from overshadowing the issues his campaign was addressing. The 2016 election coverage was definitely a "contest of personalities rather than of public policy issues" and Sanders refused to play into this personality rivalry (Tyndall, 2017, para. 2; Grim, 2016). Sanders' supporters also felt that the media was relying too much on "fluff" and not enough on the important issues (Sullivan, 2015, para. 10). For example, they criticized a Times Magazine interview where Bernie was asked what he thought about Hillary's hair (a question he refused to answer) and a New York Times headline where he was called a "grumpy old socialist" (Sullivan, 2015, para. 16).

While Sanders' focus on the issues was admirable, issues made up a very small part of the media's focus in 2016 (Media Tenor, 2015). As Figure 2 shows, only 28% of Clinton's coverage, 12% of Trump's coverage, and 7% of Sanders' coverage was focused on issues (Media Tenor, 2015). To focus so much attention on such a small area of interest for the media definitely affected Sanders' coverage.

Though Sanders did not get as much network media coverage as Clinton, his campaign's social media presence was better than Clinton's. Sanders' #feelthebern hashtag received "an average of more than 2,000 retweets per hour," while Clinton's #imwithher hashtag received only 425 retweets per hour (Holmes, 2016, para. 6). Sanders' social media also outpaced Clinton's in impact, engagement and authenticity (Holmes, 2016). This success is not a surprise, considering that Sanders' younger supporters were more likely to show up at rallies and get their election news from social media (Blow, 2016). Since Clinton tended to attract older supporters who were more likely to get their news from networks, the major networks' media bias could also be the result of Sanders' campaign not appealing to an older demographic (Blow, 2016).

## Lessons Learned

The Bernie Sanders media blackout provides valuable insights about engaging with the media during a campaign. Personality tends to earn more media in an election than issues do. Sanders' decision to not engage in the media's personality rivalry, while admirable, made him less attractive in a media environment where a very small proportion of campaign coverage was given to issues. In that way, Sanders' experience with the media also illustrates the importance of understanding the media environment your campaign is working in. Large rallies did not earn media coverage for Sanders, but could they earn coverage for a candidate in another situation? Or, are there other types of stories that seem to be attracting the media? Lastly, Sanders' campaign shows that name recognition should be a central part of the media strategy for candidates, especially for newer candidates or those running for the first time.

As a final lesson, people engaged in campaigns may need to consider whether certain principled approaches to the campaign may be less sacred than believed to be. In the case of the Sanders campaign, could they have set aside their disdain about personality-based politics to break through? If the mainstream media has a defined format for covering issues and campaigns, earning that attention may require working in that defined format—for better or worse.

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# Case Study #15: “Hello Hong Kong” Needs a Reintroduction

By Candice Fok and Ravel Chan, 2023

## Background

Hong Kong, as an international tourist city, has long relied on its thriving tourism industry. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of incoming travellers to Hong Kong dramatically plummeted, dropping from 55.91 million in 2019 to 3.57 million in 2020. In 2021, the number even further decreased to only 91,398 visitors (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2023). The contribution of the tourism industry to Hong Kong’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) plunged from 3.6 per cent in 2019 to 0.4 per cent in 2020 (Census and Statistics Department, 2021).

With the easing of the COVID-19 situation and the reopening of borders, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government, in collaboration with the Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB), organized a large-scale promotional campaign named as “Hello Hong Kong.” The campaign aimed to entice business and leisure travellers to return to Hong Kong by publicizing various measures and activities.

The campaign was officially announced on February 2, 2023, and implemented in various aspects, starting from March 1, 2023.

## Goals and Key Message

The “Hello Hong Kong” campaign was launched to revive Hong Kong’s tourism industry and reaffirm Hong Kong’s status as an iconic tourist destination after the pandemic. The campaign aimed to rebuild travellers’ confidence and attract visitors by showcasing the city’s unique attractions, cultural experiences, and renowned hospitality. The key message of the campaign is “Come and visit Hong Kong. We are as vibrant as we used to be”; unfortunately, the tagline doesn’t truly capture that message.

## Key Actors and Key Actions Taken

The government has shown great dedication to the “Hello Hong Kong” campaign. John Lee, the Chief Executive of HKSAR, was featured in the promotional video. The campaign cost the government approximately $100 million HKD ($17 million CAD) in its first phase (Hung, 2023).

The campaign included three key events (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2023).

## World of Winners 500,000 Flight Tickets Offers

In order to entice international travellers to come to Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Tourism Board partnered with Cathay Pacific Airways, Hong Kong Express, Hong Kong Airlines, and Greater Bay Airlines to offer 500,000 free, economy, return air tickets to Hong Kong from countries in Asia, Europe, North America, and Oceania (The Standard, 2023).

The tickets were distributed through the airlines' websites on a first-come, first-served basis. Winners will only need to pay for the taxes and surcharges of the ticket. "A round trip ticket between Vancouver and Hong Kong only costs me $434 CAD," tweeted a social media-using Vancouverite (Docto, 2023), while typically, economy, roundtrip tickets from YVR to Hong Kong cost in the $4,700 CAD to $5,400 range (Shepert, 2023).

## HK Goodies Visitor Consumption Voucher

HK Goodies is a consumption voucher program for foreign travellers. By signing up with a non-Hong Kong phone number, travellers were eligible for a traveller-exclusive offer worth $100 HKD ($17 CAD) or above.

Travellers can choose to enjoy a complimentary welcome drink from the participating bars or restaurants, get a cash voucher to enjoy $100 HKD off at selected merchants with no minimum spending required, or choose from other options, such as free transportation tickets or redeem special gifts at attractions as memorabilia of the visit.

## New and Upgraded Attractions

During the COVID-19 lockdown, the Hong Kong government took the opportunity to upgrade existing attractions and build new tourist spots in preparation for the reopening of the border.

New must-see destinations include M+ Museum, Hong Kong Palace Museum, the new sixth-generation Peak Tram, Water World Ocean Park, and the new night-time show in Hong Kong Disneyland. All these new developments and enhanced landmarks aimed to captivate and engage tourists, making Hong Kong still one of the most sought-after destination for world travellers.

# Outcome

The "Hello Hong Kong" campaign has yielded remarkable results in revitalizing tourism in the city after the pandemic. Since its launch, there has been a significant influx of tourists returning to Hong Kong. Recent data from the Hong Kong Tourism Board reveals a staggering increase in visitor arrivals, with roughly 10 million visitor arrivals in the first five months of 2023 (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2023). In May of 2023 alone, the total number of visitor arrivals exceeded 2.82 million, which accounted for approximately 55 per cent of the pre-pandemic level, indicating a promising rebound in the industry (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2023).

The success of "Hello Hong Kong" has garnered extensive coverage and international headlines. The campaign's innovative approach and large-scale marketing events have captured the imagination of both local and international media outlets, further enhancing Hong Kong's visibility as a premier travel destination. Despite its

achievements, however, the campaign has been criticized for failing to establish an emotional connection with the authentic essence of Hong Kong.

## Learning for PR practitioners

The government of HKSAR has regarded this post-pandemic tourism campaign a success because of the dramatic increase of the number of incoming international tourists. Meanwhile, the "Hello Hong Kong" campaign provides valuable lessons for PR specialists:

### Encapsulate the Key Message into a Snappy, Effective Tagline

While the tagline "Hello Hong Kong" is short and catchy, it fails to promote the uniqueness of Hong Kong beyond a general warm welcome. This tagline is "frothy, vapid and meaningless" (Sudhaman, 2023).

When New York said "I Love NY," it was about pride. "Hello Hong Kong" has no concrete meaning and will get ignored (Superbrands News, 2023). The key message of the whole campaign is "Come and visit Hong Kong. We are as vibrant as we used to be." However, the key message is not effectively encapsulated in the encoded message, "Hello Hong Kong." It fails to communicate the irresistible features of the "real" Hong Kong, such as the eclectic atmosphere in older districts, the well-preserved natural environment, and the underestimated waterfront running trails. They are the reasons for tourists' next visits.

Considering the slogan used by the government's BrandHK campaign in 2001: "Hong Kong — Asia's World City," the use of a supposed contradiction in terms made it very concise and clear to the world that Hong Kong is a top international city in Asia. "Hello Hong Kong" appears to be rather colourless.

### Avoid a One-off, Expensive Promotional Event and Conduct a Thorough Audience Analysis

A successful promotional campaign aims to persuade the target audience to change their behaviour in a sustainable way. In this campaign, the primary goal is to attract the international tourists to visit Hong Kong frequently.

While the giveaway of 500,000 free flight tickets is a dashing gimmick and drove global headlines, it was a costly, one-off event with very limited reach and only a short-term impact. Charles Lankester, the Executive Vice President of Global Reputation Management in Ruder Finn, likened this free ticket giveaway to a "superficial, promotional sugar rush" (Sudhaman, 2023). Take Hello Hong Kong's Canadian campaign as an example; "there are only 1,555 tickets up for grabs" (Dunn, 2023). While the giveaway may drive a considerable number of travellers to flock to Hong Kong in the short run, it is unlikely that this campaign can sustain their interest beyond the initial promotion and have them come back as frequent visitors in the long run. In other words, the cost-effectiveness of the event is low because the promotion effect diminishes very quickly.

When planning a tourism campaign, organizations must consider their return on investment. According to the statistics on incoming visitor by country, Canada was never one of the top 10 sources of visitors into Hong Kong between 2017 and 2019 (Hong Kong Immigration, 2019). Therefore, conducting a thorough audience analysis

would have helped identify the target market and allocate resources more effectively to boost the number of visitors coming from the top 10 countries, including Mainland China, Taiwan, South Korea, and the U.S.

### Test Operating Capacity Before Launching

Given that the free flight giveaway is the most dazzling event of the campaign, the first point of contact, the airline website, must be fully functional in order to leave the best first impression for all the international travellers.

Unfortunately, what most Canadians and the rest of North America got was not the free tickets, but a complete disaster (Docto, 2023). A participant tweeted, "@Cathaypacific Your execution of the rediscover HK promotion for tickets from the USA to HKG was disastrous. [...] I got nothing but error messages, denied access" (Alberts, 2023). Lots of other participants expressed their anger and frustration about the system failure, hours-long wait times and the unfairness.

Undoubtedly, the campaign of free flights giveaways has attracted worldwide attention. However, the ticket selling system failed to live up to the tourists' expectation. Therefore, comments like "don't run a campaign if your IT isn't ready" (Wong, 2023) were everywhere on X (formerly Twitter) and it may create a self-inflicted public relation headache.

To leave a positive first impression, PR campaigns must thoroughly test and prepare all systems before launching such a large-scale, massive worldwide campaign.

## Conclusion

The "Hello Hong Kong" campaign showed promising results in revitalizing tourism in Hong Kong, but there are valuable lessons to be learned for tourism boards to enhance campaign effectiveness. To further ensure a favourable return on investment, whether the number of global travellers in the next five years can be comparable with trends before a critical incident (COVID-19, in this case) will be of paramount importance.

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# Case Study #16: Whitewashing Black Lives Matter: How Pepsi's Kendall Jenner Commercial Went So Wrong

by Kyanna Cox, Julie Dao, Anjelika Seo, and Sam Schechter, 2023

In April, 2017, amidst Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests across America (Cowling, 2021), Pepsi released an advertisement featuring Kendall Jenner, a rich, white celebrity. The ad, intended to promote Pepsi as a socially conscious brand, faced severe backlash and criticism for trivializing social justice movements, exploiting activism for commercial gain, and displaying a lack of cultural sensitivity. By reviewing this case study, public relations professionals can gain valuable insight into the importance of responsible messaging, cultural awareness, and crisis management in the modern public relations landscape.

## Background

The Pepsi commercial featured young people pursuing their passions, in between depictions of young people protesting for peace. Jenner, a young model (her depicted passion), and the other people pursuing their passions are inspired by the protest and join in.

This all leads up to the protesters facing down with a rather tranquil-looking and non-militarized line of police and Jenner walking through the crowd, being sure to grab a Pepsi as she makes her way to the front. She then passes the Pepsi to a smiling police officer, who gratefully accepts it and takes a sip, resulting in everyone cheering and featuring the words "Live Bolder." The commercial concludes with the Pepsi logo and the words "Live For Now."

The independent message, outside of buying Pepsi products, seemed to be that passionate young people have the power to make change. However, the advertisement was generally received very poorly due to the unfair and unrealistic portrayal of conflict between civil rights protesters and police, especially in the context of documented police violence against both protesters and Black Americans (D'Addario, 2017).

## Goals

Pepsi had several goals with the commercial. First, the company aimed to promote itself as a socially conscious brand aligned with important social causes. By associating its product with social activism, Pepsi hoped to resonate with consumers who prioritize brands that support social justice issues. Second, Pepsi wanted to increase its brand relevance among younger consumers. By featuring Jenner, a popular figure among the target demographic, the company sought to appeal to millennials and Gen Z consumers who value authenticity and social responsibility. Third, Pepsi aimed to generate buzz and positive brand sentiment through viral marketing. The company intended for the commercial to go viral on social media platforms, sparking conversations and driving engagement.

Needless to say, one lesson of this public relations case study is that their approach not only failed, but backfired horribly.

## Criticisms

The backlash came not only from Black Americans, protesters, and allies, but also from national figures such as Bernice King, the daughter of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Vis et al., 2020). King criticized the ad on Twitter (now X) with an image of her father in the middle of a protest, being pushed back by a police officer, with the caption reading, "If only Daddy would have known about the power of #Pepsi" (Smith, 2017). Beyond that, Pepsi was accused of "appropriation of aesthetics in protest" (Victor, 2017); many pointed out how the officers in the commercial were noticeably less militarized than the heavily armed and armoured officers whom Black Lives Matter protesters often faced.

Elle Hearns, a former BLM organizer, told the *New York Times* that the ad "plays down the sacrifices people have historically taken in utilizing protests" (Victor, 2017). Pepsi's portrayal of a protest is much like a big party, where protestors are celebrating and having a good time. However, the reality of protests, such as those for the BLM movement, is that they can be very dangerous.

There are many instances where Black protesters have been arrested and/or attacked by law enforcement, despite protesting peacefully. Black people who go to the streets to protest are arguably risking their lives each time they do so. Protesters harmed in the past made a tremendous sacrifice to stand up for their cause. The infamous moment when Kendall Jenner hands a police officer a Pepsi trivializes these risks and sacrifices.

## Damage Control

Not even 48 hours after its release (Tillman, 2019), Pepsi took the ad down. The company also released a statement:

> *"Pepsi was trying to project a global message of unity, peace, and understanding. Clearly we missed the mark, and we apologize. We did not intend to make light of any serious issue. We are removing the content and halting any further rollout. We also apologize for putting Kendall Jenner in this position."*

The apology to Jenner was criticized because it was a job she was paid for; the apology implied she had no idea what she was doing (suggesting ignorance, rather than a calculated public relations and media mistake).

Jenner never made any public statements at the time; however, her also-famous sisters made statements to drum up understanding or pity for the young celebrity (Gonzales, 2017). Jenner deleted any trace of the Pepsi campaign from her social media accounts. Being the face of the campaign, Jenner took on a large portion of the backlash, which was amplified due to the ongoing accusations of the Kardashian-Jenner family black-fishing, fetishizing Black men and children, and other related controversies. The family controversy went so far as to become a meme and is still something commonly referred to when talking about her career.

However, there was seemingly no long-term impact on her career outside of reinforcing some people's opinions of the Kardashian-Jenner family.

On the other hand, Pepsi saw its lowest measured perception levels in over eight years. Younger people's purchase consideration was at its lowest level in three years. Particularly, the purchase consideration of Millennials had gone from 33% in 2015 to 23% in 2017, an all-time low for the company (Tillman, 2019).

## The Pepsi "Live For Now" Campaign (2017) versus the Coca-Cola Peace Campaign (1971)

The concept of promoting a food product as bettering humanity isn't new. In 1971, Coca-Cola released their "Hiltop" ad (Project ReBrief, 2012), featuring young people of different ethnocultural backgrounds singing about Coca-Cola having the power to unite the world, painting a picturesque world filled with "love" and "harmony." Of note, during this time, major ongoing protests against the Vietnam War were prominent across America. Similar to the 2017 Pepsi ad, amidst ongoing protests, a successful company sought a way to capitalize on the protest sentiment.

However, the Coca-Cola ad was received well, as the company claims to have received more than 100,000 letters of support. Coca-Cola called it "one of the most iconic ads ever made" (Coca-Cola Company, 2012).

The major difference between the campaigns is just the age they were released in. In the 1970s, America was just exiting the Consumer Era, where there was a lot of trust between companies and consumers (National Museum of American History, n.d.). By 2017, people were feeling the negative effects of corporate greed globally. Since the 1970s, general living costs have gone up and wages have not kept up with inflation or corporate profits (Mishel, Gould, & Bivens, 2015).

Another major difference is that the Vietnam War wasn't taking place in America. Although Americans were directly impacted by the Vietnam War, the conflict itself was half a world away. The ongoing police brutality against Black Americans was something happing in their cities, neighbourhoods, and even in their own homes. The death and violence was experienced with less of a buffer. Also, social media gave an incredible forum for rapid, collective, snowballing criticisms against Pepsi. Coca-Cola faced no such social media threat in 1971.

## Learning for Public Relations Practitioners

This case study sheds light on the significance of responsible messaging, cultural awareness, and effective crisis management within the realm of public relations. By examining the key aspects of the Pepsi controversy, practitioners can extract valuable lessons for their professional endeavours.

Cultural sensitivity and authenticity emerge as vital pillars in successful public relations initiatives. The Pepsi commercial faced severe backlash for trivializing social justice movements and exploiting activism for commercial gain. To evade appropriation and commodification, practitioners must approach sensitive issues with a profound understanding of cultural nuances. Younger consumers, particularly millennials and Gen Z, value authenticity and gravitate towards brands that genuinely support social causes. Aligning messaging with their values establishes a genuine connection, mitigating any perception of insincerity or exploitation.

This idea of incorporating social activism or "wokeness" into corporations and marketing is one that, while controversial, with the right touch, can be successful. A good example of this is Nike's 2016 "Dream Crazy" campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick, a recognized and controversial social activist. While both campaigns seem to be inspired by the Black Lives Matter protests, a key difference is that Kaepernick was a Black man

facing backlash by the NFL for kneeling during the American national anthem, whereas Jenner was neither a prominent voice for justice nor part of an oppressed minority (Guardian Sport, 2019).

Further, clarity and focus in messaging plays a pivotal role in ensuring effective communication. The Pepsi commercial faced criticism for its vague messaging, which failed to clearly articulate the cause advocated by the protesters. Practitioners should strive for specificity, ensuring that their messaging aligns precisely with the values they seek to promote. Clear and concise communication facilitates a better understanding of objectives and intentions, fortifying the effectiveness of the message.

Learning from criticism and responding promptly represent integral components of crisis management. In the face of substantial backlash, practitioners must promptly acknowledge the criticism and take appropriate action. Pepsi's swift removal of the commercial and issuance of an apology within 48 hours exemplifies such a response. This not only mitigates damage to the brand's reputation, but also demonstrates a genuine commitment to addressing public concerns. Embracing criticism as an opportunity for growth and using it to inform future strategies is essential for long-term success.

Regardless of taking precautions, there's always a risk for corporations trying to align themselves with people facing hardship. These corporations are not people and do not share the same concerns, persecution, or prejudice. Even though ads can be displayed as a desire by the corporation to make a change, there is always going to be the motivation for profit and gain. For a lot of people, the profit motive will never outweigh the hope they have to impact social change.

Continuous monitoring and adaptation are crucial. The Kendall Jenner and Pepsi controversy demonstrates social media's immense power in amplifying sentiment. Practitioners must proactively monitor and listen to social media feedback, adapting strategies accordingly. Transparent dialogue and prompt addressing of concerns prevent crises and enhance brand perception.

However, as closing food for thought, despite the magnitude of the ad's negative response, this did not have a significant long-term impact on Pepsi's brand perception. The company's revenue for the 12 months ending March 31, 2023, was $88 billion, about a 9% increase above the previous year. Their revenue and net-worth continue to increase (Macrotrends, 2023).

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