

**Crisis Communication Case Study: The Indispensability of Proactivity**

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## **Research Process Statement**

To research for this essay, I used the Auburn University online library, the University of Mississippi online library, and Google to explore prevalent PR websites, platforms, and case studies. Once I had collected all of my sources and analyzed them for useful information, I put my notes into ChatGPT to generate an outline that I could tweak to meet the needs of this essay. That is the extent to which I used AI to aid in the pre-writing drafts of this essay. I wrote the drafts piece by piece and crafted it into a well thought out essay detailing successful crisis communications.

## **Crisis Communication Case Study: The Indispensability of Proactivity**

One of the most essential elements of successful crisis communications is proactivity. Two case studies will be discussed in this essay dealing with two companies in crises: Papa John's and Crockpot. The Institute for Public Relations defines crisis as, "a significant threat to operations that can have negative consequences if not handled properly." ("Crisis Management," 2007) In crisis management, threat is defined as, "the potential damage a crisis can inflict on an organization, its stakeholders, and an industry." ("Crisis Management," 2007) Through analyzing successful and unsuccessful attempts at crisis PR campaigns in these companies, I hope to convey the necessity of proactivity in the practice of crisis communications.

### **Papa John's Crisis Management**

Papa John's faced a period of severe backlash after several incidents of offensive commentary and misconduct became public. The foundation for the controversy surrounding Papa John's resulted from the NFL's kneeling campaign followed by racially explicit comments made on a company Zoom call by John Schnatter, the company's CEO. The National Anthem protest and the heightened sensitivity around brain injuries associated with playing football led to a decline in viewership in the NFL Sunday Night Football television program. In both 2016 and 2017, Papa John's was, "the most recognized sponsor of NFL football." (Schwab, 2021) Papa John's sales were affected by the decline in viewership due to their sponsorship. (Schwab, 2021)

CEO John Schnatter blamed the decline of sales entirely on the NFL kneeling protests in comments that he made to his performance analyst team. Those comments led to severe backlash, including an 11% decrease in stock prices. (Schwab, 2021) While the company in no way condoned these comments, the only steps that the company took to amend the situation was

issuing an apology via Twitter 14 days later, after which the company went silent. When stock prices then fell by 13%, Schnatter had no choice other than to step down as CEO, while remaining as the company's largest shareholder and on the company's board of directors. (Schwab, 2021) To make matters worse, *Forbes* released an article accusing Schnatter of using a racial slur in a marketing Zoom call, and later released a video proving these accusations to be true. While Schnatter and Papa John's both released statements apologizing for these comments, the apologies were not well received by the public. Schnatter eventually did step down from all of his positions within the company, but the effects of his leadership continue to affect the company to this day. Papa John's spent millions of dollars on rebranding efforts, paying legal fees, rehiring staff, and stimulating investors. While it was successful for the most part in recovering as a company, its lack of early action in crises escalated the issues and led to a severely damaged brand reputation.

### **Analysis of Papa John's Crisis Communication**

The common thread in both of these examples is the lack of proactivity in dealing with crises incrementally. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, proactivity is, "acting in anticipation of future problems, needs, or changes." (Merriam-Webster, 2002) Keeping up with the fast-paced nature of the PR industry, heightened in the digital world, is essential to success in the field of crisis communication. It is a challenge to foresee certain crises to be able to be proactive, but proactivity in PR is more about the immediacy of response when faced with a crisis. The longer an organization waits to respond, the longer publics have to make assumptions and judgements about the organization. In the case of Papa John's, through its delayed response, the public was given ample time to curate opinions about the situation before the company itself even released a statement. That is the problem. In both crises, proactive responses could have

given them the chance to flip the narrative to one that maximized solutions, rather than trying to back track from the problem.

### **CrockPot Crisis Communication**

In contrast to the actions of Papa John's, CrockPot, a popular kitchen appliance company, turned a potential crisis into a clever campaign. In 2018, NBC's hit series *This Is Us* was the top-rated show on television with approximately 32.7 million viewers. (Foss, 2019) The show details the life of the Pearson family. Jack Pearson, the father of the family, is renowned as the most beloved character in the show. In the episode titled "Super Bowl Sunday," Jack Pearson tragically dies in a house fire caused by an old CrockPot being left on overnight. As soon as the episode wrapped, loyal viewers took to social media to express their distaste for CrockPot and their discomfort with using the product in the future. Immediately, CrockPot started responding to these comments and social media posts with clear messaging detailing the safety measures that CrockPot takes to ensure that this fictional tragedy doesn't occur in real life. They also started a campaign called, "CrockPotIsInnocent," which consisted of ads and commercials reiterating the fact that CrockPot was not responsible for anyone's death. The goal was to differentiate the fictional storyline from a real-life brand crisis. The genius part of this crisis campaign was that, not only did CrockPot lean on the *This Is Us* fan base to promote their efforts, but it also used the actor who played Jack Pearson as the star in their commercials. CrockPot didn't focus on the death, but rather focused on all of the things that CrockPot was known for, such as bringing people together and community. This not only eased the minds of many CrockPot customers, but, surprisingly, it boosted their sales. The quick, lighthearted but meaningful nature of CrockPot's response turned this PR crisis into a business win.

Proactivity plays a central role in successful crisis communication. There are very few crises that cannot be solved through proactive, consistent, and clear communication with external publics and internal staff. Papa John's failed to deliver a genuine, timely, professional apology and failed to implement solutions that would make sure the same nature crises don't happen multiple times. Conversely, CrockPot took an unfortunate turn in the plot of a fictional but popular television series and shifted it into a hyper-successful PR win through an immediate and well-thought-out campaign. A company can define its success in crisis communication by its ability to be proactive in the face of potential controversy.

## References

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